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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2003

Loaded with Holiday Crime

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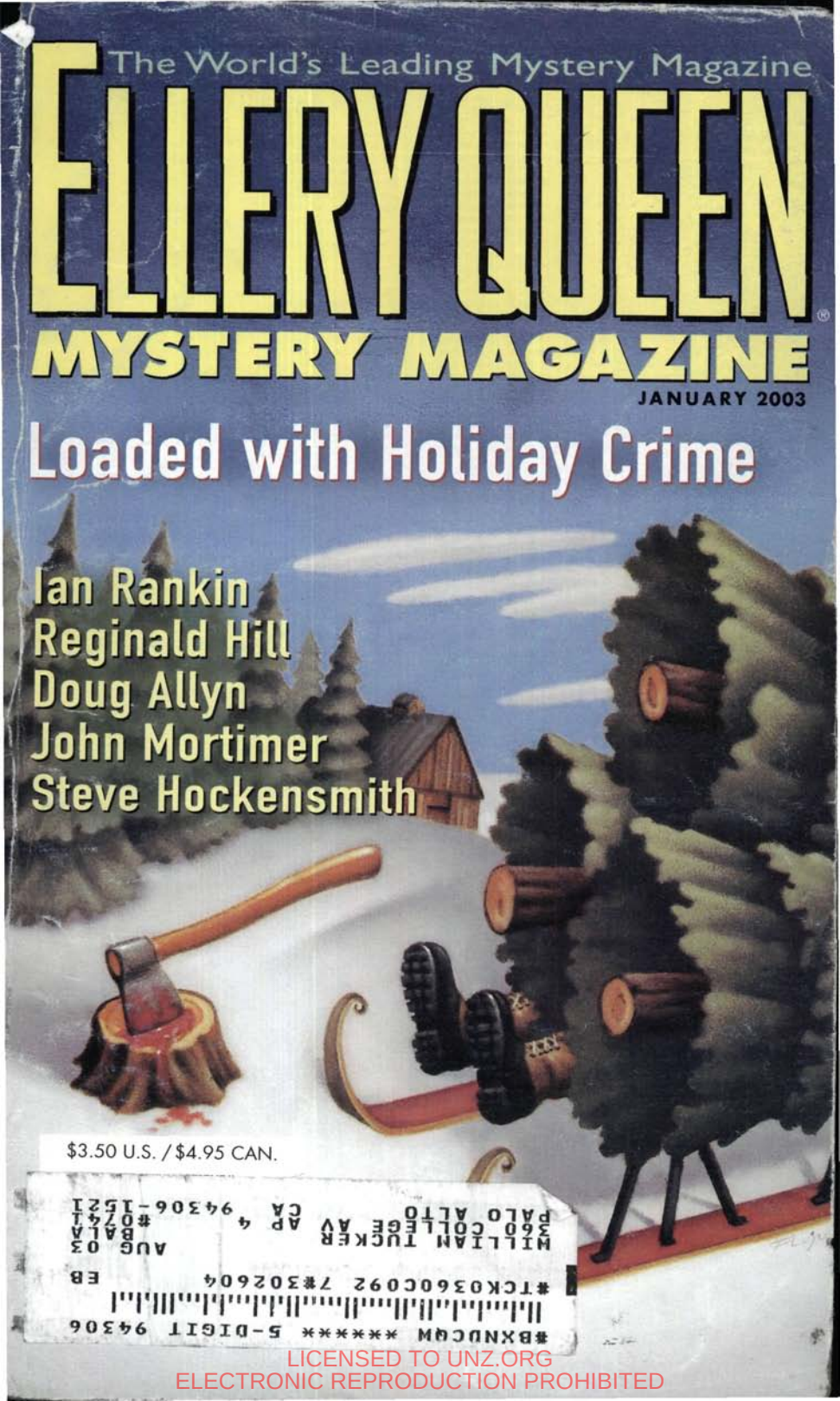

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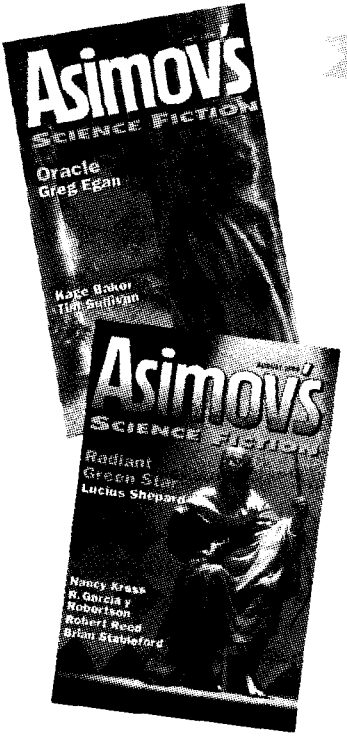

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JANUARY 2003

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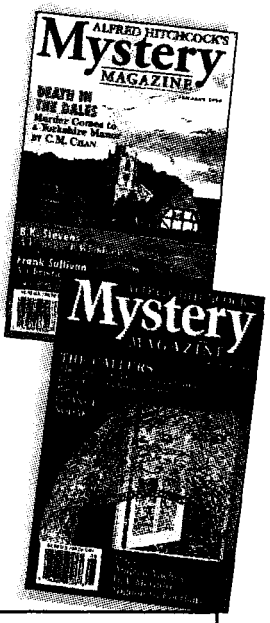

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Art by June Levine

No Sanity Clause

by Ian Rankin

It was all Edgar Allan Poe's fault. Either that or the Scottish Parliament. Joey Briggs was spending most of his days in the run-up to Christmas sheltering from Edinburgh's biting December winds. He'd been walking up George IV Bridge one day and had watched a down-and-out slouching into the Central Library. Joey had hesitated. He wasn't a down-and-out, not yet anyway. Maybe he would be soon, if Scully Aitchison MSP got his way, but for now Joey had a bedsit and a trickle of state cash. Thing was, nothing made you miss money more than Christmas. The shop windows displayed their magnetic pull. There were queues at the cash machines. Kids tugged on their parents' sleeves, ready with something new to add to the present list. Boyfriends were out buying gold, while families piled the food trolley high.

And then there was Joey, nine weeks out of prison and nobody to call his friend. He knew there was nothing waiting for him back in his hometown. His wife had taken the children and tiptoed out of his life. Joey's sister had written to him in prison with the news. So, eleven months on, Joey had walked through the gates of

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Saughton Jail and taken the first bus into the city centre, purchased an evening paper, and started the hunt for somewhere to live.

The bedsit was fine. It was one of four in a tenement basement just off South Clerk Street, sharing a kitchen and bathroom. The other men worked, didn't say much. Joey's room had a gas fire with a coin-meter beside it, too expensive to keep it going all day. He'd tried sitting in the kitchen with the stove lit, until the landlord had caught him. Then he'd tried steeping in the bath, topping up the hot. But the water always seemed to run cold after half a tub.

In February of 2003 Little, Brown will publish Ian Rankin's new Inspector Rebus novel, *Resurrection Men*. Says the publisher: "With the brilliant eye for character and place that earned him the name 'the Dickens of Edinburgh,' Ian Rankin delivers a page-turning novel of intricate suspense." Speaking of Dickens, this new story finds Rebus surrounded by suspects dressed as Little Nell, Miss Havisham, and other classic Dickens figures. †

"You could try getting a job," the landlord had said.

Not so easy with a prison record. Most of the jobs were for security and nightwatch. Joey didn't think he'd get very far there.

Following the tramp into the library was one of his better ideas. The uniform behind the desk gave him a look, but didn't say anything. Joey wandered the stacks, picked out a book, and sat himself down. And that was that. He became a regular, the staff acknowledging him with a nod and sometimes even a smile. He kept himself presentable, didn't fall asleep the way some of the old guys did. He read for much of the day, alternating between fiction, biographies, and textbooks. He read up on local history, plumbing, and Winston Churchill, Nigel Tranter's novels and National Trust gardens. He knew the library would close over Christmas, didn't know what he'd do without it. He never borrowed books, because he was afraid they'd have him on some blacklist: convicted housebreaker and petty thief, not to be trusted with loan material.

He dreamt of spending Christmas in one of the town's posh hotels, looking out across Princes Street Gardens to the castle. He'd order room service and watch TV. He'd take as many baths as he liked. They'd clean his clothes for him and return them to the room. He dreamt of the presents he'd buy himself: a big radio with a CD player; some new shirts and pairs of shoes; and books. Plenty of books.

The dream became almost real to him, so that he found himself nodding off in the library, coming to as his head hit the page he'd

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been reading. Then he'd have to concentrate, only to find himself drifting into a warm sleep again.

Until he met Edgar Allan Poe.

It was a book of poems and short stories, among them "The Purloined Letter." Joey loved that, thought it was really clever the way you could hide something by putting it right in front of people. Something that didn't look out of place, people would just ignore it. There'd been a guy in Saughton, doing time for fraud. He'd told Joey: "Three things: a suit, a haircut, and an expensive watch. If you've got those, it's amazing what you can get away with." He'd meant that clients had trusted him because they'd seen something they were comfortable with, something they expected to see. What they hadn't seen was what was right in front of their noses: to wit, a shark, someone who was going to take a big bite out of their savings.

As Joey's eyes flitted back over Poe's story, he started to get an idea. He started to get what he thought was a very good idea indeed. Problem was, he needed what the fraudster had called "the startup," meaning some cash. He happened to look across to where one of the old tramps was slumped on a chair, the newspaper in front of him unopened. Joey looked around: Nobody was watching. The place was dead: Who had time to go to the library when Christmas was around the corner? Joey walked over to the old guy, slipped a hand into his coat pocket. Felt coins and notes, bunched his fingers around them. He glanced down at the newspaper. There was a story about Scully Aitchison's campaign. Aitchison was the MSP who wanted all offenders put on a central register, open to public inspection. He said law-abiding folk had the right to know if their neighbour was a thief or a murderer—as if stealing was the same as killing somebody! There was a small photo of Aitchison, too, beaming that self-satisfied smile, his glasses glinting. If Aitchison got his way, Joey would never get out of the rut.

Not unless his plan paid off.

John Rebus saw his girlfriend kissing Santa Claus. There was a German market in Princes Street Gardens. That was where Rebus was to meet Jean. He hadn't expected to find her in a clinch with a man dressed in a red suit, black boots, and snowy-white beard. Santa broke away and moved off, just as Rebus was approaching. German folk songs were blaring out. There was a startled look on Jean's face.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"I don't know." She was watching the retreating figure. "I think maybe he's just had too much festive spirit. He came up and grabbed me." Rebus made to follow, but Jean stopped him. "Come on, John. Season of goodwill and all that."

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"It's assault, Jean."

She laughed, regaining her composure. "You're going to take St. Nicholas down the station and put him in the cells?" She rubbed his arm. "Let's forget it, eh? The fun starts in ten minutes."

Rebus wasn't too sure that the evening was going to be "fun." He spent every day bogged down in crimes and tragedies. He wasn't sure that a "mystery dinner" was going to offer much relief. It had been Jean's idea. There was a hotel just across the road. You all went in for dinner, were handed an envelope telling you which character you'd be playing. A body was discovered, and then you all turned detective.

"It'll be fun," Jean insisted, leading him out of the gardens. She had three shopping bags with her. He wondered if any of them were for him. She'd asked for a list of his Christmas wants, but so far all he'd come up with were a couple of CDs by String Driven Thing.

As they entered the hotel, they saw that the Mystery Evening was being held on the mezzanine floor. Most of the guests had already gathered and were enjoying glasses of cava. Rebus asked in vain for a beer.

"Cava's included in the price," the waitress told him. A man dressed in Victorian costume was checking names and handing out carrier-bags.

"Inside," he told Jean and Rebus, "you'll find instructions, a secret clue that only you know, your name, and an item of clothing."

"Oh," Jean said, "I'm Little Nell." She fixed a bonnet to her head. "Who are you, John?"

"Mr. Bumble." Rebus produced his nametag and a yellow woolen scarf which Jean insisted on tying around his neck.

"It's a Dickensian theme, specially for Christmas," the host revealed, before moving off to confront his other victims. Everyone looked a bit embarrassed, but most were trying for enthusiasm. Rebus didn't doubt that a few glasses of wine over dinner would loosen a few Edinburgh stays. There were a couple of faces he recognised. One was a journalist, her arm around her boyfriend's waist. The other was a man who appeared to be with his wife. He had one of those looks to him, the kind that says you should know him. She was blond and petite and about a decade younger than her husband.

"Isn't that an MSP?" Jean whispered.

"His name's Scully Aitchison," Rebus told her.

Jean was reading her information sheet. "The victim tonight is a certain Ebenezer Scrooge," she said.

"And did you kill him?"

She thumped his arm. Rebus smiled, but his eyes were on the MSP. Aitchison's face was bright red. Rebus guessed he'd been drinking since lunchtime. His voice boomed across the floor, broad-

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casting the news that he and Catriona had booked a room for the night so they wouldn't have to drive back to the constituency.

They were all mingling on the mezzanine landing. The room where they'd dine was just off to the right, its doors still closed. Guests were starting to ask each other which characters they were playing. As one elderly lady—Miss Havisham on her nametag—came over to ask Jean about Little Nell, Rebus saw a red-suited man appear at the top of the stairs. Santa carried what looked like a half-empty sack. He started making his way across the floor but was stopped by Aitchison.

"J'accuse!" the MSP bawled. "You killed Scrooge because of his inhumanity to his fellow man!" Aitchison's wife came to the rescue, dragging her husband away, but Santa's eyes seemed to follow them. As he made to pass Rebus, Rebus fixed him with a stare.

"Jean," he asked, "is he the same one . . . ?"

She only caught the back of Santa's head. "They all look alike to me," she said. Santa was on his way to the next flight of stairs. Rebus watched him leave, then turned back to the other guests, all of them now tricked out in odd items of clothing. No wonder Santa had looked like he'd stumbled into an asylum. Rebus was reminded of a Marx Brothers line, Groucho trying to get Chico's name on a contract, telling him to sign the sanity clause.

But, as Chico said, everyone knew there was no such thing as Sanity Clause.

Joey jimmied open his third room of the night. The Santa suit had worked a treat. Okay, so it was hot and uncomfortable, and the beard was itching his neck, but it worked! He'd breezed through reception and up the stairs. So far, as he'd worked the corridors all he'd had were a few jokey comments. No one from Security asking him who he was. No guests becoming suspicious. He fitted right in, and he was right under their noses.

God bless Edgar Allan Poe.

The woman in the fancy-dress shop had even thrown in a sack, saying he'd be wanting to fill it. How true: In the first bedroom, he'd dumped out the crumpled sheets of old newspaper and started filling the sack—clothes, jewellery, the contents of the mini-bar. Same with the second room: A tap on the door to make sure no one was home, then the chisel into the lock, and hey presto. Thing was, there wasn't much in the rooms. A notice in the wardrobe told clients to lock all valuables in the hotel safe at Reception. Still, he had a few nice things: camera, credit cards, bracelet, and necklace. Sweat was running into his eyes, but he couldn't afford to shed his disguise. He was starting to have crazy thoughts: take a good, long soak; ring down for room service; find a room that hadn't been taken and settle in for the duration. In the

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third room, he sat on the bed, feeling dizzy. There was a briefcase open beside him, just lots of paperwork. His stomach growled, and he remembered that his last meal had been a Mars Bar supper the previous day. He broke open a jar of salted peanuts, switched on the TV while he ate. As he put the empty jar down, he happened to glance at the contents of the briefcase. "Parliamentary briefing . . . Law and Justice Subcommittee . . ." He saw a list of names on the top sheet. One of them was coloured with a yellow marker.

Scully Aitchison.

The drunk man downstairs . . . That's where Joey knew him from! He leapt to his feet, trying to think. He could stay here and give the MSP a good hiding. He could . . . He picked up the room-service menu, called down and ordered smoked salmon, a steak, a bottle each of best red wine and malt whisky. Then heard himself saying those sweetest words: "Put it on my room, will you?"

Then he settled back to wait. Flipped through the paperwork again. An envelope slipped out. Card inside, and a letter inside the card.

"Dear Scully," it began. "I hope it isn't all my fault, this idea of yours for a register of offenders . . ."

"I haven't a clue," said Rebus.

Nor did he. Dinner was over, the actor playing Scrooge was flat out on the mezzanine floor, and Rebus was as far away from solving the crime as ever. Thankfully, a bar had been opened up, and he spent most of his time perched on a high stool, pretending to read the background notes while taking sips of beer. Jean had hooked up with Miss Havisham, while Aitchison's wife was slumped in one of the armchairs, drawing on a cigarette. The MSP himself was playing ringmaster, and had twice confronted Rebus, calling for him to reveal himself as the villain.

"Innocent, m'lud," was all Rebus had said.

"We think it's Magwitch," Jean said, suddenly breathless by Rebus's side, her bonnet at a jaunty angle. "He and Scrooge knew one another in prison."

"I didn't know Scrooge served time," Rebus said.

"That's because you're not asking questions."

"I don't need to. I've got you to tell me. That's what makes a good detective."

He watched her march away. Four of the diners had encircled the poor man playing Magwitch. Rebus had harboured suspicions, too . . . but now he was thinking of jail time, and how it affected those serving it. It gave them a certain look, a look they brought back into the world on their release. The same look he'd seen in Santa's eyes.

And here was Santa now, coming back down the stairs, his sack

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slung over one shoulder. Crossing the mezzanine floor as if seeking someone out. Then finding them: Scully Aitchison. Rebus rose from his stool and wandered over.

"Have you been good this year?" Santa was asking Aitchison.

"No worse than anyone else," the MSP smirked.

"Sure about that?" Santa's eyes narrowed.

"I wouldn't lie to Father Christmas."

"What about this plan of yours, the offender register?"

Aitchison blinked a couple of times. "What about it?"

Santa held a piece of paper aloft, his voice rising. "Your own nephew's serving time for fraud. Managed to keep that quiet, haven't you?"

Aitchison stared at the letter. "Where in hell . . . ? How . . . ?"

The journalist stepped forward. "Mind if I take a look?"

Santa handed over the letter, then pulled off his hat and beard. Started heading for the stairs down. Rebus blocked his way.

"Time to hand out the presents," he said quietly. Joey looked at him and understood immediately, slid the sack from his shoulder. Rebus took it. "Now on you go."

"You're not arresting me?"

"Who'd feed Dancer and Prancer?" Rebus asked.

His stomach full of steak and wine, a bottle of malt in the capacious pocket of his costume, Joey smiled his way back towards the outside world. ●

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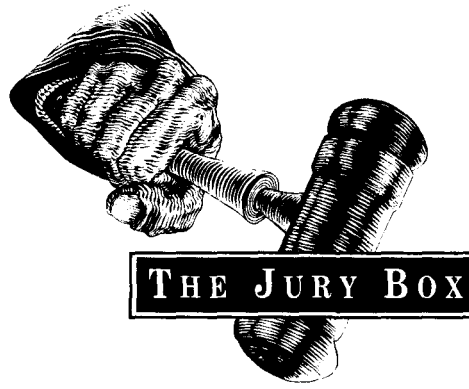

by Jon L. Breen

The balance of trade in crime fiction has always favored English-language writers, but several recent translations remind us that some notable mysteries are written in other languages. One element these imports have in common would be welcome in more American and British crime fiction: brevity, which not coincidentally was a key attribute of the foreign writer most successful in the U.S. market, Georges Simenon. For an example of his mastery of plot, place, and people, showing his famous Parisian sleuth Inspector Maigret in top form, try the unabridged audio reading by Clifford Norgate of the 1965 novel *Maigret Bides His Time* (Audio Partners, $19.95). Then turn to a major event: the first translation into English of a Simenon short-story collection that predated Maigret.

*** Georges Simenon: *The 13 Culprits,* translated from the French by Peter Schulman, Crippen & Landru, $35 hardcover, $16 trade paperback. The investigations of Examining Magistrate Froget, which first appeared in 1930 under the pseudonym George Sim, comprised the last of three series of stories, each presented in two parts (problem and solution) in consecutive issues of the French periodical *Détective.* The sharply drawn characters and intense Q and A suggest the Simenon to come, though the minute-mystery angle makes for an odd hybrid. Four of the stories appeared in *EQMM* in the 1940s. Schulman's informative introduction says Anthony Boucher's translations were "very creative but sometimes took liberties with Simenon's writing . . ."

*** Viviane Moore: *A Black Romance,* translated from the French by Rory Mulholland, Orion, $7.95. In 1144, Chevalier Galeran de Lesneven's rare visit to his Brittany home is interrupted by a call for help from a fellow knight and lord of the manor whose peasants'

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children are disappearing (and sometimes dying) at an alarming rate. The translation reads well, and the plot and historical detail are strong. With all the medieval series currently in production, this one could easily be overlooked.

*** Andrea Camilleri: *The Shape of Water,* translated from the Italian by Stephen Sartarelli, Viking, $19.95. The first novel about likable and unconventional Sicilian police Inspector Montalbano, originally published in Italy in 1994, shows why the series has been a major success in Europe. The problem, involving the death of a local politician cum mafioso, is complex and nicely worked out. The translator's end notes elucidate such questions as the value of eighty million lire.

*** Paco Ignacio Taibo II: *Frontera Dreams,* translated from the Spanish by Bill Verner, Cinco Puntos, $13.95. In a short novel first published in Mexico in 1990, private eye Hector Belascoaran Shayne tracks a former school friend, now the beautiful movie star Natalia Smith-Corona (she also considered Olivetti and Remington for her stage name), who has fled to the northern border. Taibo's observations on the Mexican character, relations with the United States, and male-female interactions are stimulating as always. The mystery plot is best characterized by a Chestertonian paradox: "Belascoaran, unlike the authors of crime novels, liked complex stories, but only those in which nothing happened" (page 106).

** Louis Sanders: *Death in the Dordogne,* translated from the French by Adriana Hunter, Serpent's Tail, $13. A British amateur painter living in rural France observes contrasting social customs as well as a series of murders. While Taibo doesn't pretend to be writing a conventional whodunit, Sanders does, and thus for all the good writing and vivid sense of place, the manner of the final revelations, via a deus ex machina and sans meaningful detection, is a grave disappointment.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Road to Perdition,* Onyx, $6.99. A quite different kind of translation is the screenplay novelization, of which this is a unique example: Collins's novel based on David Self's screenplay based on Collins's graphic novel with illustrator Richard Piers Rayner (reviewed here in December 1998). The film and the novelization diverge considerably from the original, especially in the latter stages. Collins fills in with enough additional detail, explanation, and background to make version three of the epic story a rewarding experience. (The film with Tom Hanks and Paul Newman, directed by Sam Mendes and beautifully photographed by Conrad L. Hall, is a masterpiece of mood, emotion, and nonstop tension destined to rank with *Little Caesar, The Godfather,* and other gangster classics.)

***Michael Jecks: *The Sticklepath*

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Strangler, Headline/Trafalgar Square, $28 hardcover, $9.95 paperback. In 1322 Devonshire, rumors of cannibalism and vampirism accompany the discovery of a murdered village girl's body. Sir Baldwin Furnshill, Keeper of the King's Peace, and Bailiff Simon Puttock investigate in the twelfth of a historical series highly praised in Britain and only now gaining U.S. distribution. Strong in all areas, the novel will suit lovers of the traditional puzzle better than most contemporary mysteries.

** Bill Crider: *A Knife in the Back,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. In her second case, community college English Department chair Sally Good looks into the murder of a board member. This one is too laid-back and repetitive to rank with Crider's best, but in the trapped-by-the-killer climax, the straight-arrow tendencies of one of Sally's potential romantic interests, English teacher Jack Neville, provide some irresistible humor.

Prospective writers of crime fiction will find helpful guidance in the second edition of *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America* (Writer's Digest, $16.99), edited by Sue Grafton and including essays by many of the best in the field. Also recommended to writers, as well as fans of the subjects, is an excellent series of hour-long video documentary/interviews with the overall title *The Mysterious Pen* from producer/interviewer Bill Creed at Duet Communications (www.mysteriouspen.com, $30 each). Subjects so far are Lawrence Block, Jeremiah Healy, and Parnell Hall. Creed avoids the talking-heads syndrome with a combination of graphics, on-screen notes, and varied backgrounds.

Speaking of Lawrence Block, the 883-page, 84-story retrospective *Enough Rope* (Morrow, $29.95) has contents similar but not identical to the 1999 British *Collected Short Stories* (Orion), which had some U.S. distribution by Trafalgar Square. Block has also ordered the stories differently, added some additional ones, and written a new introduction, so completist Block collectors will surely want both volumes. Those content with just one will prefer the American edition for its hard covers and additional stories.

For the reference shelf, an excellent documentary compilation, originally published in 1989 in an expensive library volume, is now available in trade paperback: *Hardboiled Mystery Writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald: A Literary Reference* (Carroll & Graf, $22), edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Richard Layman.

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Art by Mark Evans

VALHALLA

by Doug Allyn

Stalking the stage in Detroit's Cobo Arena, Jimmy Callaway belted out his show's final number, "Chubby Lover." A strong song. Jimmy jumped on it, hammering the lyrics like Mike Tyson in his prime. Angry, shirtless, sweating, Jimmy screamed the final verse on his knees, bringing the crowd to its feet with a roar, whistling and applauding as the FX cannons spewed potassium flashpowder fireworks at the rear of the stage. A spectacular finish.

For me, business as usual. I've heard Callaway and the BluesCrew perform "Chubby Lover" live at least forty times in twelve states. But I've never actually seen him sing the song. I'm always facing the other way, in the center of the security line, scanning the crowd, looking for trouble.

And finding it. Before the Cobo concert my security crew busted a half-dozen kids at the gate packing weapons, mostly blades, but two had pistols. We held the gunslingers for Motown P.D., booted the others, kept the knives.

A girl collapsed in the lobby, probably an Ecstasy overdose. We

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popped her into one of the standby ambulances; they got her to the Samaritan E.R. in good shape.

Security cameras caught two punks hustling crack in the john. We grabbed them up, stuck them in a storeroom with the two gunslingers.

All that before the show even started. I figured we were in for a long night. I was right. As BluesCrew cranked out their opening notes, a dozen schoolgirls rushed the stage.

Grappling with half-dressed teenybopper chicks doesn't sound like heavy work. More like an adolescent's wet dream.

It's not. Handling a wild-eyed female pumped on adrenaline and *Xena: Warrior Princess* flicks is tricky business. Punching out a girl in front of six thousand hostile witnesses isn't an option, nor is grabbing her anywhere in the vicinity of a private part. No breasts, thigh, crotch. It's like trying to wrestle an ostrich with one hand.

Meanwhile, your squirming bird is free to claw, bite, stomp you with a spike heel, or make you a soprano with one wild kick. All in the name of young love. Or something like it.

I haven't been a teen for a while but I still understand that craziness. It keeps me going. The buzz. The energy. The sheer spectacle of the shows.

Working concert-tour security pays well. So does bouncing at casinos or collecting for finance companies. But no straight job can match the blood-pumping rush of a road tour with a real artist.

Sure, sometimes it's a grind. Working the northeast leg of the BluesCrew tour we did twenty-one shows in twenty-six nights. You forget which century you're in, to say nothing of which state. Screaming crowds. Overbooked halls. Stowaways. Bomb threats. Sound checks. Tear-downs. Junk food, fast food, road food, no food.

Dumb-ass jokes are funnier by a factor of ten when you're exhausted. All-night philosophizing on the bus. Easy silences. Sudden violence when a psycho comes charging out of the crowd. . . .

But no one rushed us tonight. I glanced down the line at the security crew. Seven guys in BluesCrew Tour T-shirts, all big, evenly spaced, facing the audience, heads up. Most were local hires, and all of us would be paid off at the end of the night.

In its review of Doug Allyn's 2001 novel *Welcome to Wolf Country* (Five Star Press) *Booklist* said: "Allyn is a talented crime writer whose characters have a way of sticking in readers' psyches. He also understands the kind of small-town mentality that resents outsiders and protects its own."—a mentality that's at the crux of this new Allyn story, in which a small-town sheriff is determined to keep outsiders like P.I. Axton out of his Valhalla-like town. ¶

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End of the road. Last show of the American tour. Time to give Jimmy Callaway the bad news.

BluesCrew got two standing ovations and played an encore. Then vanished while a deejay from WRIF Detroit plugged CD and T-shirt sales and upcoming Cobo concerts.

My security line held position until the hall cleared, then double-checked the aisles for stowaways and contraband while I went backstage to find my boss.

Cobo Arena's dressing rooms are all business, more like a hospital than a rock palace. Jimmy and his manager, Marv Kerabatsos, were in the star suite, surrounded by a cluster of press people. I waited at the back of the room while Jimmy fielded the last few questions, then helped Marv shoo out the reporters. Marv's big enough to work security himself, wide as a buffalo, coarse features. Too smart for rough work, though: a memory like a Pentium chip.

Jimmy looked whipped. Gaunt as a Russian icon, shaggy blond mane damp with sweat, body art running down his arms. His tattoos are repainted for each show. He looks surprisingly ordinary without them. In shades and a baseball cap he can shop at Wal-Mart without drawing a second glance. Marvin's idea. Fame and flash onstage, anonymity off.

Jimmy glanced up, reading my face. "She didn't show up, did she, Ax?"

"No. I watched the gate myself, Jimmy. Scanned the stands with binoculars. All my guys had her picture. No Monica. Sorry."

"Okay, I guess that's it." He opened a bottle of Evian water, slugged down half of it. "If she won't see me, it's time to move on. To Montreal, for openers. London next week."

"Why did you expect her in Motown?" I asked. "Why not Cleveland or wherever?"

"Her family's from Detroit. With Christmas coming, I thought she might be home for the holidays, you know? I met her here at a press party, last tour. Been together most of a year. Then six weeks ago she just . . . took off. My fault."

"Did you two have a fight?"

"An ugly one," Jimmy acknowledged, sipping more water. "Monica turned up pregnant. I didn't handle it well."

"Have you tried to contact her?"

"Every damned day. Her parents hang up on me. I don't know if they forward my messages or not. And being on the road, I couldn't exactly drop by for a chat. It's okay, Ax, forget about it. Maybe it's fate, karma, whatever. Your guys did a good job on the tour, tell 'em I said thanks. I gotta hit the showers. See ya. Take care."

"You, too."

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Stripping off his shirt, Jimmy vanished into the john. No handshake, no tip. No need. Road dogs. Mercenaries in a rock-'n'-roll army.

"Got a minute for me, Axton?" Marvin asked.

"I can spare a week, now. What's up?"

"You used to run a detective agency, right? Are you still in that business?"

"Sort of. Keeping a P.I. license makes it easier to get a concealed-weapons permit, but I'm no Sherlock Holmes. I mostly work security or collect bad debts, contracts, whatever. Why?"

"This girl, Monica Sorenson? Do you think you could find her?"

"Jimmy just said to forget it."

"Jimmy's the purest poet of his generation." Marvin shrugged. "That doesn't make him a genius about women. Monica isn't some band-aid, she's a really nice kid. Jimmy's hung up on her and she's carrying his child. They need to sort this out, one on one."

"If it's important to you, any legit agency could—"

"I don't know them," Marv interrupted: "I know you. And I trust you to keep your mouth shut. This mess is a perfect supermarket-tabloid story: 'Heiress Carries Rock Star's Love Child.' Besides, I figure you're better equipped to find her."

"How so?"

"You know this life we're in, you know the street, you're used to dealing with whacked-out kids. Monica didn't take off because of some little spat. She and Jimmy fought like *Rocky III* the whole time they were together."

"Then why did she bail?"

"She was developing a semiserious drug problem. I think she split to clean up, to keep from hurting her baby."

"What's she into?"

"Speed. Started with diet pills. Moved up to black beauties, white crosses."

"Not crank? Methedrine?"

"No, she doesn't shoot anything. She's just young, paranoid about her figure. Tried better living through chemistry, got hooked. S.O.S."

"And if I find her, what do you want me to do? Buy her off? Scare her off?"

"Neither," Marvin said, surprised. "Monica's no gold digger, her family's loaded. But this thing's eating Jimmy up. He's in love with her and he really wants this baby whether he admits it or not. And unhappy stars make for lousy shows. Find Monica, ask her to contact Jimmy or get a number he can call. Beg and plead, threaten, do what you have to, but get them in touch."

"You want me to play Cupid? That's it?"

"No offense, but you'd be the butt-ugliest Cupid on the planet,

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Axton. Just find the girl. Bill my agency and keep me posted. Okay?"

If America is a melting pot, Detroit must be cooking on a low flame. Motown is subdivided into a checkerboard of ethnic sectors. Some, like Greektown and Chinatown, are obvious. Others aren't. But they're just as touchy.

Dearborn has more Arabs than Oman; Hamtramck has Poles and Hungarians. Warsaw Heights used to be Polish but the Russian Mafia owns it now. Murderous thugs that make Motown's street gangs seem like amateurs. And the crime rate shows it.

Grosse Pointe and the outer burbs are separated by more subtle markers. A green line. Money. Mostly old money, but new money's acceptable if you've got enough. Marv was right, Monica Sorenson definitely didn't need Jimmy Callaway's cash. God bless the child who's got her own.

The Sorensons' three-story neo-Gothic could have tumbled out of a Currier and Ives greeting card: Streetlamps glowing in the snowy dusk, Christmas decorations glistening in the windows. The American dream. Home for the holidays. I felt like the Grinch as I rang the bell.

The woman who answered was tall and blond. And startled. My face affects people that way sometimes. I have a few scars from a motorcycle accident. They're not pretty, but they're useful in my line of work. Supermodels trade on their looks. So do I.

"Mrs. Sorenson? My name's R. B. Axton. I'm a private investigator. Can I have a minute?"

"What is it, Helen?" Her husband joined her in the doorway, taller, more silver than blond. Equally handsome. Matched thoroughbreds: cardigans, slacks, deck shoes. If Sorenson was intimidated by my size, scars, or black leather coat, he didn't show it.

"What do you want, Mr. . . . ?"

"Axton. I'd like to ask about your daughter, Mr. Sorenson. Monica."

"What about her? Is she all right?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

"What do you mean? What do you want with Monica?"

"Just a word. Could we talk inside, please? It's breezy out here."

He hesitated, annoyance wrestling with common courtesy in his eyes. Courtesy won. "Come in, but keep it short. We have guests. Could I see some identification, please?"

I showed him my license and a business card, glancing around as he checked them. The foyer was expensive but tasteful: Swedish kilim rugs, jagged modern art on the impeccably white walls. In the great room beyond, a half-dozen people were sipping

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wine around a floor-to-ceiling fireplace, Mantovani murmuring "Winter Wonderland" in the background.

"What's this about?" Sorenson asked, handing me back my ID.

"I'm trying to locate your daughter, sir. If—"

"Did that lowlife she's been seeing hire you? Callaway? If Monica's finally come to her senses and left him I couldn't be happier. Tell him to forget about her and leave us alone."

"It's not that simple, Mr. Sorenson. When did you speak to Monica last?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Monica left Jimmy more than a month ago. He hasn't heard from her since and he's concerned. Has your daughter contacted you recently?"

"Not since Thanksgiving," Mrs. Sorenson put in, worried. "She called from . . . Omaha, I think. But she was still traveling with Callaway then. Is anything wrong?"

"Not that I know of, ma'am. Is it normal for her to be out of touch for a month?"

"She's young and headstrong, but she's always been quite good about calling—"

"Until recently," her husband finished. "It's my fault. We had a few arguments over the people she's with, the life she's been leading. We want better things for her."

"I understand. Do you have any idea where she could have gone? Who she might be staying with?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I did," Sorenson snapped. "We're done here. And as I said, we have guests. Good night, Mr. . . . ?"

"Axton."

"Whatever. Come, Helen." He wheeled and stalked off. His wife stayed, frowning at my business card.

"Is Monica in any trouble, Mr. Axton? I mean with . . ." She swallowed. "Drugs? Anything like that?"

"Why do you ask?"

"She wasn't quite . . . herself the last few times we talked. I thought she might be, you know, using something."

"Then the sooner I find her, the better, don't you think? If she had a problem that she wanted to work out, where do you think she'd go?"

"I don't know. Maybe Burns Cove."

"Burns Cove?"

"It's a northern resort town on Lake Michigan. We have a summer cottage there. Sometimes Monica goes up there to be alone, think things through. If something's troubling her she might be at the Cove. I've called several times but sometimes she turns off the phone. If I give you the address, will you let me know if she's all right?"

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The answer should have been no. Client confidentiality, conflict of interest, etc. But she was a worried mom whose daughter hadn't come home for Christmas.

"Yes, ma'am, I'll be glad to. Could you jot down the address for me, please? And do you know what kind of car Monica might be driving?"

"A silver Mercedes roadster. An older car, early eighties, I think. A graduation present. I'm afraid I don't know the model number. My husband might."

"A silver Benz is enough. And I wouldn't worry too much. Sometimes kids get wrapped up in their own problems and forget everything else."

"I suppose they do. Please don't mind my husband. Harold never likes Monica's boyfriends, Jimmy Callaway least of all."

"No offense taken, ma'am. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you. And Mr. Axton? Have a merry Christmas."

"I'll try," I said. "And a merry Christmas to you."

I wasn't being sarcastic. I meant it. I've got a soft spot for Christmas. Not the reality, of course. The virtual one.

Reality is a fall-to-February marathon of sham sales, rent-a-Santas, and tots with dollar signs dancing in their eyes.

The Christmas I love is the one on TV. Jimmy Stewart grinning up into the falling snow in *It's a Wonderful Life.* The "White Christmas" Bing Crosby sings about.

Unfortunately, all that wintry white stuff can make for dicey driving, especially for a good ol' boy raised in the sunny South.

My suitcase was still packed for the tour so I headed upstate that night. Straight into the teeth of the first serious storm of the season. The freeways were plowed, but my old Camaro kept slipping and skidding like a cockroach on a coal stove.

With eighty miles yet to go, I gave it up, pulled off the freeway, found a Best Western, and crashed for the night.

Or tried to. I couldn't sleep. Maybe too much adrenaline from the tour still pumping through my system. Or too much Monica on my mind.

I'd only seen Monica Sorenson once; she and Jimmy split up soon after I joined the tour. Pretty girl. Straight blond hair, Nordic features, good smile. She had it all: rich parents, a rock-star boyfriend. And baby makes three.

A lot for a kid to deal with. I could understand her dumping Jimmy to clean up and get her head straight. But why would she drop completely out of sight?

Rebellious? Possibly. Pregnant, definitely. Maybe she was trying to avoid an ugly scene with her father. But that didn't fit the image of the scrapper who fought with Jimmy like *Rocky III.* And

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if she was the good kid Marv described, why would she leave her mom twisting in the wind?

Best guess? Kicking the drugs was a lot tougher than she expected. It always is. Unless she decided not to kick at all.

Either way, Mrs. Sorenson wasn't the only one who was worried now. Marv was right, I do know the street and the life we're in. There are some seriously dangerous people standing in the shadows of the music business. And a pretty girl with a drug problem might meet some of them in a hurry.

Morning dawned clear and cold. Twenty-five crisp degrees, ice-blue skies without a cloud in sight. The plows had been out all night and the freeway was clear and dry.

Not that it mattered much. Burns Cove is nowhere near a freeway. It's barely on the map at all. If Michigan looks like a mitten in a mud puddle, Burns Cove could be a hangnail on the fickle finger of fate. A little harbor town perched on the tip of a narrow peninsula. One road in, thirty miles of two-lane blacktop that snakes through forested hills to the northern shoreline.

As I drove I kept catching glimpses of Lake Michigan through the snow-dusted pines, a deep, cobalt blue dappled with startling white ice floes the size of Buicks. Breathtaking. No other word for it.

The village of Burns Cove looked as rustic as its name, snowbound, dreaming on the shores of "the shining big sea water."

Not much going on, the harbor closed for the season, a dozen touristy shops in the downtown district, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and a BP full-service truck stop on the outskirts near the turnoff to the interstate. Welcome to Smallville.

Except that I wasn't going there. The Sorensons' cottage was up in the hills northeast of the Cove, out in the middle of nowhere. But easy enough to find, as it turned out. Signs at the mouth of each lane listed the names and addresses of the cottage owners. Very convenient. A shopping guide for burglars.

The Sorensons' private lane wasn't plowed, but the storm had been milder up here, only a few inches of snow on the ground. The cottage wasn't visible from the road so I decided to risk driving in.

And risky it was. The blacktopped lane wound upward into the forest, threading between century-old pines, slippery as a ski slope. A tense, white-knuckled drive. And for nothing.

The lane ended at the cottage driveway, atop a bluff that overlooked Lake Michigan. The view was spectacular and the home wasn't half bad either, a rambling split-level log cottage with a two-car garage and a back deck hanging in space at the bluff's edge. A seventy-foot drop to the stony beach below, a magnificent view of the far shore.

And nobody home.

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No tire tracks, no smoke from the chimney, no lights on. The drapes were open, so I climbed out and circled the house, peering in through the windows like a Peeping Tom.

Definitely empty. But not necessarily unoccupied. No dust covers were draped over the furniture, and there was an open newspaper on a coffee table. Couldn't make out the date. Damn. Maybe the place had been unoccupied since the summer. Or maybe Monica was staying here and just happened to be away at the moment.

One quick way to find out. The date on that newspaper should tell me one way or the other. And I hadn't driven all the way up here to walk away wondering.

The cabin locks were top of the line Schlages. It took me all of fifteen seconds to pick the front door mechanism. Easing in, I listened to the utter silence for a moment, then yelled hello. Didn't expect an answer. Didn't get one.

Inside, the cottage wasn't quite as pricey as the Sorenson home in Grosse Pointe, but it was still top drawer. Danish modern furniture in loden green leather, with carpeting to match. Unfortunately, the newspaper on the coffee table was from mid August. Which meant Monica probably wasn't here and hadn't been. Double damn.

I did a quick case of the place anyway. No sign of anyone in residence, but the cottage didn't feel truly empty, either. For one thing, it was too immaculate. No dust, not a cobweb in sight. I guessed it had been cleaned recently. Nothing suspicious about that. The Sorensons could obviously afford maid service. Still, something didn't feel quite right about it.

To me, the house looked more like a department-store display than a home. And maybe it was. Maybe this is how the rich relax, artfully arranging their expensive paintings and pottery just so. A bit fussy for me, but then I collect Lonnie Mack LPs and drive a '69 Camaro.

I may not be artsy, but I'm thorough. I checked the garage. Which was as clean as the house and just as empty. No Mercedes roadster, no machinery, period. Not even a lawn mower. But as I turned to go, something registered.

An oil spot. In the middle of the floor. It would have been perfectly normal in most garages, but this one was practically antiseptic. And the spot looked fresh.

Kneeling, I touched it, rubbing the residue between my fingertips. Definitely motor oil. Definitely recent. Motor oil usually dries after a few days. In a cold, closed garage it might stay moist a little longer, but not more than a week or two.

Which meant . . .what? That someone had been here? A cleaning lady or a caretaker? Or Monica. I decided to give the house a closer look, toss the bedrooms and baths for openers.

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Didn't get the chance. As soon as I stepped in the house, I knew something was wrong. Big time. A black and white prowl car was parked across the driveway, blocking my Camaro in.

A big cop was leaning casually against the passenger door. Blond guy, blue uniform, no hat. Just relaxing, enjoying the day. With a Winchester Defender twelve-gauge shotgun cradled in his left arm.

I stepped out the front door, keeping both hands in plain sight. He looked me over curiously but with no particular hostility.

"Good morning. I'm Sheriff Lofgren. Swede, to my friends. You can call me Sheriff Lofgren. Who might you be?"

"My name's Axton. I'm a licensed private investigator from Detroit. I'm going to show you my license and ID. Okay?"

"Good idea, why don't you do that." He had an easy, apple-pie grin. His face was weathered, roughened by the wind. He was probably forty-something, but that smile erased the years, made him seem almost boyish. Still, it never quite reached his eyes. Deep blue and as chilly as the big lake.

The shotgun was pointed away from me and he didn't shift it as I reached inside my coat. But I had the distinct impression that if I brought out anything bigger than a wallet, the coroner would have to scrape up my carcass with a spatula.

I carefully eased out my identification and handed it to Lofgren. He scanned it, then scanned me. That cheerful smile never wavered. Nor did the shotgun. Mr. Welcome Wagon with a twelve-gauge.

"According to this, you're a licensed P.I. all right. We don't get many up here. So what kind of a case are you working?"

"I'm looking for the girl who lives here, Monica Sorenson. Has she been around?"

"Nope, not that I'm aware of. I keep a list of who's in town, who's away, and we check every empty cottage almost every day. Extended surveillance, we call it."

"It sounds efficient."

"Mostly it just passes the time. Burns Cove isn't exactly a crime hot spot. But every once in a while we get a live one. Some guy comes up here from Detroit, sees a quiet little burg with ritzy summer getaways and a hometown cop. Looks like easy pickings, doesn't it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, it's not. I was on the Detroit force eighteen years. Detective for the last six. Frank Murphy Hall of Justice. You know that building, Axton?"

"I've been there a time or two. On business. We might even know people in common. Do you know a lieutenant named Lupe Garcia? Metro Homicide?"

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"Loop was still a sergeant when I left. Made lieutenant, eh? Good for him. So what?"

"So if you call him, he can identify me."

"Why would I want to do that? You just showed me your license and up here folks pretty much take a man at his word. You've been in the city too long, Mr. Axton."

"I thought you might have some doubts. Since you're still holding that shotgun."

"Maybe that's because you're kind of a scary-lookin' fella. What happened to your face, if you don't mind my askin'?"

"Motorcycle accident. Lost an argument with the freeway."

"Looks like it hurt a whole lot. Are you about finished here?"

"Pretty much."

"Then I won't keep ya. It's a beautiful day for a drive, you can probably make Motown by dark."

"Are you running me off, Sheriff?"

"Me? Of course not. You said you were looking for Monica Sorenson. Since she's not here I figured you'd be headin' south. Not much to do up here in the winter but ice fish, and the lake's not frozen yet. Are you a fisherman, Mr. Axton?"

"Not really, but I thought I might ask around about Monica, see if anyone's seen her."

"It'd be a waste of time. The Sorensons are summer people, they don't mix much with the locals. Come here, let me show you something."

I followed him around the side of the house to the edge of the bluff. The wind off the lake had a real bite, dropping the temperature ten degrees. I hugged myself, trying to keep my hands warm. Lofgren didn't seem to notice, and he wasn't even wearing a coat.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said quietly.

I managed a nod.

"If you look down the west shore there, you can see the house where I was born. I mean born right in the house. No hospital, no doctor for forty miles. Most local families had their kids at home in those days. Hardy folks, the locals. The town was settled by Swedes and Norwegians, mostly. Vikings. Like me. Only it wasn't Burns Cove then. Know what they called it?"

"No, what?"

"Valhalla. It means Viking heaven. They say this coast looks a lot like Norway. Cliffs, blue water, icebergs, and all. A developer bought up these hills in the sixties, built fancy chalets for city folks. Petitioned the state to change the name of the village to something more American. Said Valhalla sounded too foreign."

"Let me guess. The developer's name was Burns, right?"

"You oughta be a detective." Lofgren grinned. "Anyway, the locals went along with it. Fishing was played out by then and they

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needed the work. Some guys had to commute two hours one way, five days a week to work in Midland, Saginaw, Bay City. Drove home every night. Because they wanted to be here, you know? Raise their families here. But most of the young people moved south to find work. Like I did."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Just trying to save you some trouble. I was born here, Axton, grew up here, played in these hills when I was a raggedy-ass kid. Not cowboys and Indians. Viking raiders and Englishmen. I was always a Viking. Eric the Red, Leif the Lucky." He shook his head, smiling.

He waited for me to comment. I didn't.

"So maybe that makes me a hick in your book. But I was a big-city cop for most of twenty years and I know what I'm doing. Monica Sorenson's a pretty girl and she's summer people. If she came up to the cottage I would have heard about it before she got unpacked. She didn't. So there's no point in you goin' around bothering a lot of people. No offense, but some of these folks moved up here to get away from guys who look like you."

"You've got no right to shut me down, Lofgren."

"Rights?" His grin widened but his eyes went as icy as the floes floating below. "I could bust you right now for unlawful entry, Axton. Unless you can show me one of these." He held up a key ring. "See the label on this one? It's a key to the Sorenson place. Got one?"

I didn't answer. Which was answer enough.

"I didn't think so. You should be more careful when you pick a lock. You left a little scratch mark by the keyhole."

"I'll try to remember that."

"Good. And just so we understand each other, sport, if I wanted to lean on you, you'd know it. If you want to pad your bill by asking local folks a lot of dumb-ass questions, be my guest. But this is my territory, my people. If I hear one complaint, you'll find out how nasty an old-time Viking can be. Understand?"

"I read you loud and clear."

"Thought you would. You seem like a smart fella. Enjoy your stay in Valhalla, Axton. Or Burns Cove, if you prefer. Either way, keep it short."

Lofgren climbed back in his prowlie, flipped me a mock salute, then rumbled off to continue his extended-surveillance rounds.

Leaving me alone with my one crummy oil spot. Which was probably about nothing. Still, I'd made a very long drive.

Assuming Lofgren was right, Monica wasn't here. But somebody had been. Somebody who parked in the garage. If it was Monica, she hadn't stayed long or Lofgren would have heard about it. So maybe kicking her speed habit was more than she'd been able to

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handle. She came, laid low a few days, got the jitters, and split. To where?

To see the doctor, most likely. Doctor Feelgood. Since she came to get straight, she probably didn't bring any dope along. But if her cleanup program crashed, she'd need a hit in a hurry.

Which meant she'd have to buy locally. Right here in Viking heaven. Lofgren claimed he knew his job. I wondered how tough it would be to find a speed dealer in his quiet little town?

At least I knew where to ask. To get hard drugs, heroin, cocaine, even high-grade reefer, you need a contact. Speed's cheaper and a whole lot easier to find.

As easy as a quick lunch at the BP truck stop outside Burns Cove. Not many truckers use serious speed, but most will pop a hit now and again to make one more town, one more leg of a three-day run. And they all know where to find it. I chatted up a few long-haul drivers, came up with a name in ten minutes.

In Burns Cove, hit a tavern called Finn's Waterfront. See a skinny kid named Gunnar.

The village reminded me of a movie Christmas. The main drag running downhill to the harbor. Brick streets and sidewalks, old-fashioned globular streetlamps. Most of the buildings were nineteenth-century, beautifully restored to their original Victorian splendor: cast-iron facades, shop windows sparkling with holiday displays while carols swirled in the wintry air.

Christmas in Valhalla.

Even Finn's Waterfront was cheerier than a harbor bar had a right to be. The back wall was one long picture window, offering a marvelous view of the lakescape: dark water and drifting icebergs as far as the eye could see. I could have gawked at it for hours. None of the locals gave it a glance.

There were roughly a dozen customers in the place, rough being the key word. Unshaven laborers in plaid coats, baseball caps. A few stone alkies at the bar drinking lunch. Three hard-eyed types at a back table were playing dominoes. Which isn't a game you see much outside of Warsaw Heights. One was smoking, held his cigarette cupped in his palm. Russians? If so, they were a long way from home, no matter how you measured it.

My guy was at a corner table, facing the front door. Mid twenties, Detroit Lions jacket and cap, his left hand encased in a dirty plaster cast. Narrow-faced, with razor-cut sideburns and goatee. And the jittery eyes and papery skin of a true believer. A speed dealer wired up on his own product.

I didn't approach him immediately. Ordered a draft beer and watched him work from the end of the bar. Gunnar made two sales in the first half-hour, first to a young roughneck trucker, sec-

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ond to an older guy, almost certainly a foreigner from the way he held his cigarette.

I caught an odd vibe, and realized the domino players were checking me out. One of them met my stare with a cold, thousand-yard glare of his own before returning to his game. Nothing subtle about that look. A mind-your-own-business warning a stranger gets in any hard-case bar from Maine to Mississippi.

Gunnar wasn't subtle either, taking care of business right at the table. Kept a pitcher of beer in front of him; his customers joined him, had a glass, chatted, shook hands as they left, making the exchange. Strictly minor league.

After his third buyer left, I carried my beer over to his table.

"Mind if I sit?" I eased down opposite him without waiting for an answer. "You'd be Gunnar, right? My name's Axton. People call me Ax."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"Nope. If we'd met, you'd remember."

"Face like yours, you got that right. What do you want?"

"A trucker named Mikey told me where to find you."

"Don't know any Mikey. And I definitely don't know you. Take off."

"For a guy in your line, being rude is a mistake that can cost you. I'm not lookin' to cause you problems. I'm looking for a girl. This girl." I slid Monica's photograph across the table to him. He glanced at it, didn't react.

"Never saw her before."

"Sure you have. Her name's Monica. Speed's a small world, Gunnar, so I figure you've done business with her. Tell me about her and it's worth fifty to me. Jack me around and you'll need a cast for your other hand."

"Hey, no need to cop an attitude." He jerked his injured paw off the table, dropping it to his lap. "Fifty for what I know, right?"

"If I like it."

"Her name's Monica Sorenson. Family has a cottage up the shore someplace. Strictly summer people. Last I heard she was running with some rock star."

"Tell me something I don't know. When did you see her last?"

"Monica?" He chewed on his lip, thinking. "Early in the summer. June, maybe July. She was here for a week with her folks."

"Not since?"

"No."

"Does she have any friends around here? Anyone she might be staying with?"

"Nah, like I said, summer people. Rich pricks. Fancy cars, fancy boats. They don't mix with the local riffraff."

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"Unless they want to buy something. Like speeders, for instance. Monica's got a habit."

"She used to cop a pop now and again but she was never a regular and I haven't seen her lately. That's all I got for you. That worth fifty?"

"Not hardly."

"Then take a hike, Axton. You're bad for business."

I eyed him, trying to get a read on him. He was young and wired up. And spooked. I'm used to that, my face tends to make people uneasy. Not this time. Gunnar was way too pushy. He might be afraid of something, but it wasn't me. Maybe I'm slipping.

"Here's a twenty and my card," I said, tossing them on the table. "Ask around about Monica, then call me. It's worth another C-note."

"Yeah, right. Go home, wait by your phone."

"I've got a cell," I said, leaning across the table, my battered nose an inch from his. "You can reach me anytime. But don't make me wait too long. You're real easy to find."

"Okay, okay, I've got the message. I'll call you. Now take off, eh?"

Leaving Finn's Waterfront was a relief. Afternoon sunshine, fresh air, no secondhand smoke. . . . I hesitated. Déjà vu. I'd had this feeling earlier. When I stepped out of the Sorenson cottage to face that cop. Only I'd been too distracted at the time to notice. Shotguns have that effect on me.

Fresh air. That's why the cottage felt lived in. There was a taint of secondhand smoke. I'm so used to it in clubs and concerts I didn't give it a thought. But I should have. Because it was out of place.

There were no ashtrays at the cottage, nor had I noticed any at the Sorenson home. They didn't smoke. But someone at that cottage did.

Maybe a girl trying to take her mind off a bad case of amphetamine-withdrawal jitters?

One of the best/worst things about cell phones is that they work almost everywhere. Which means a moron teenybopper chick two rows behind you in a movie can tell her friends how the flick's going. But it also means I could stroll down to the lake, find a bench on the pier, park, and make a few calls.

But I didn't. Not at first. It would have been blasphemy. Strolling along the pier with the lake swells lifting floating bergs, white as refrigerators, I was awestruck by the sheer beauty of the view. The biggest freshwater sea in the world. Steep cliffs on the far shore wreathed in silvery mist. The foothills of the Porcupine Mountains? Or maybe a rocky fjord somewhere in Norway. What had Lofgren called it? Valhalla.

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Viking heaven. I could see why the first settlers chose the name.

The old Vikings in their dragon ships would have felt right at home here. Sheltered harbor, towering trees to build their longhouses and repair their war boats. And easy plunder for the taking in any direction.

They could raid Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Buffalo, or fifty ports on the Canadian shore. For a moment I pictured hard men in horned helmets storming the casinos at Windsor or Detroit. Come to think of it, swap the ships for motorcycles and they'd probably fit right in.

Back to business.

I hit Marv Kerabatsos's number on the speed dial. And actually got him. A rare thing.

"Marv, it's Ax. Quick question, does Monica Sorenson smoke?"

"You mean reefer?"

"I mean anything."

Silence as Marv scanned his memory banks. "No. Definitely not. Monica's a health freak. Yogurt, granola, megavitamins, that whole trip. Not a smoker."

"Amphetamines aren't exactly health food."

"She was only popping them to stay slim. Probably thought of them as one more vitamin. Which they're not. Never used anything else, though. If a doobie came around at a party she wouldn't even toke it to be polite. Any luck so far?"

"Yeah. All bad. I'll be in touch." I rang off. Then did a little thinking myself. Bottom line, if Monica wasn't here I had no idea where she might have gone. Maybe to stay with a friend her parents didn't know about. If so, I might be able to trace her through her credit cards eventually. Assuming she still had them.

The secondhand smoke at the cottage was bugging me. Not just because it was there, but because it was strong. Like the smoke in Finn's Waterfront. Coarse tobacco. Unfiltered. Not many Americans smoke unfiltered cigarettes. It's a European thing. Even if Monica tried smoking to settle her nerves, I couldn't see her starting out with . . . Russian cigarettes?

Maybe that's why the stench had lingered. Or maybe my imagination was working overtime. Either way, I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Since I couldn't find the girl, I decided to try tracing her car.

I made a call to Monica's mother and caught a break. Since the car was a present, the Sorensons were still carrying Monica's Mercedes on their auto insurance policy. She said she'd find the paperwork and call me back.

I took a long last look at the lake. The silvered mist was drifting down from the north, darkening the swells with a sense of foreboding. Maybe there really were ghostly dragon ships lurking out

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there in the haze. I headed back to the warmth of my car.

Mrs. Sorenson called me back before I got there and gave me the model number, the year, and even the VIN number for Monica's Mercedes. When she asked why I needed it, I said I might be able to locate Monica by tracking down her car. Which wasn't entirely true.

Fetching my laptop computer out of the trunk, I found an Art Deco coffee shop with an Internet hookup, bought a tall (small) cup of mocha java, and went car shopping.

Pundits expected the Internet to revolutionize the world, and for a while it looked like it might. But for most of us it's basically e-mail, airline tickets, and a monster sheet of electronic want ads.

I keyed in the model and year of Monica's Benz and promptly got twenty-one hits. Only sixteen were for sale in the U.S. and five of those were in California. I left them for last. Instead, I started in the Midwest, beginning in Detroit, then on to Toledo, then Chicago.

Each time I'd phone the number given and chat up the seller, getting details, then I'd ask where the cars came from originally. One was from Alabama. Three were from Florida. But the first car listed in Chicago was from Michigan.

"No rust, though," the salesman promised. "It's practically mint."

"It's also possibly stolen. Can you check the VIN number for me, please?"

He did, muttering the whole time. "I knew the deal was too good to be true." He read the VIN number off the title. They matched. Damn it.

"What do I do now?" he groaned.

"For openers, take it off the market. Since you bought it in good faith you're in the clear. I'm only interested in the guy who sold it to you. It was a guy, right? Not a young girl?"

"No, definitely a guy. Shoulda known it was hot by lookin' at him."

"What name did he give you?"

"Gary Danielson. It's bogus, right?"

"Probably. But Danielson used to quarterback the Detroit Lions and my suspect is a big Lions fan. What did he look like?"

"Like a Backstreet Boy on welfare. White kid, maybe twenty-five, ratty little bastard with skinny sideburns."

"Was his left hand in a cast?"

"Yeah, it was. Hey, do me a favor? If you see him, put his other damn hand in a cast for me."

"It'll be a pleasure."

I didn't go back to Finn's Waterfront. Gunnar was dealing openly there. All he lacked was a neon sign out front saying Friendly Local Dope Dealer Inside. Which meant he probably had some kind of an arrangement with the tavern owner. And maybe with the local law as well. Either way, the bar was no place to brace

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him. He had friends there and I didn't. And when I talked to Gunnar again, I didn't want any interruptions. Or any witnesses.

I parked a half block up the hill from Finn's Waterfront next to a small playground. No need to be subtle; Gunnar didn't know my car. I opened the coffee from the cafe and settled in to wait.

Not for long. Five minutes later someone rapped on my window. Sheriff Lofgren. I rolled it down.

"Hey, Axton. I thought you'd already be halfway back to Motown."

"Probably will be, soon. Kinda hate to leave. I can see why the locals called it Viking heaven. What's that word again?"

"Valhalla."

"Valhalla, right. I'll try to remember that."

"You waiting for someone, Axton?"

"Nah, just enjoying the view."

"The view's better down by the harbor."

"I was there earlier. Got cold. Besides, I'm a city boy. I prefer seeing things from a car."

"Suit yourself," Lofgren said with a shrug. "Sun will be down before long, though. Then there won't be any view."

"And I'll probably move on."

"Pity. I was just getting used to having you around." Lofgren smiled, aiming his finger at me like a pistol, dropping his thumb. Perfect shot, right through the head. He sauntered off, whistling along with an airborne carol.

I rolled my window up, watching him go. He didn't look back. Ten minutes later, Gunnar walked out of Finn's tavern. He scanned the street, then hurried toward me. Kept glancing over his shoulder, checking his backtrail. No need. The street was empty. Which suited me fine.

As he passed my Camaro, I kicked open the passenger door, sweeping him off his feet. I was on him before he could react, gave him a stiff-finger jab to the diaphragm, driving his wind out, doubling him over. Grabbing the front of his jacket, I tossed him into the Camaro's backseat like a sack of potatoes. Did a quick three-sixty check. No witnesses. No noise, unless you counted Perry Como crooning "God rest ye merry, gentlemen . . ." from a storefront speaker.

Cranking up the Camaro, I pulled out, heading south. Gunnar got his breath back before we cleared the city limits. "Man, are you nuts? This is kidnapping!"

"Shut up."

"Listen, I got rights—"

I backhanded him, slamming him into the corner of the seat. He cowered there, blood running down his mouth. Good. I'd hit him

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harder than I'd intended, but not as hard as I wanted to. And I needed him afraid.

A few miles out of town I spotted a dirt road, turned off, and followed it till we disappeared into the woods. Then I jammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop, bouncing Gunnar off the seat back.

While the car was still rocking I popped my glove box, pulled out my Browning Hi-Power automatic, jacked a round into the chamber, then faced Gunnar.

"Here's how it is. You lied to me. That was a big mistake and you only get the one. I'm not the law, I don't run by their rules. You've got no rights, no lawyer, nothin' comin' to you. Lie to me again and I'll cap you right here, kick your carcass out, and scatter some black beauties around. Dope dealer whacked in a ripoff. Even your mama will believe it. You with me?"

"Okay, okay! I get it. Jesus, I'm dead anyway. What the hell do you want?"

"The same thing I asked before. Where's Monica?"

"I don't know—"

I cocked the hammer.

"Wait! I really don't!"

"You sold her car, Gunnar. I traced it to you."

"The Swede told me to, he—"

"Swede?"

"The sheriff, Swede Lofgren. He told me to peddle the ride. Get rid of it. Said I could keep the money but no paperwork, no questions."

"And you just went along? Didn't ask him where he got it?"

"Man, I wouldn't ask the Swede the time of day. I got crossways of him once. Never again, man! He's crazier than you!"

"How do you mean?"

"He's got his own rules. Lets me move speed and weed but no hard stuff, no dealin' to kids. Couple months back I peddle a couple pops to some downstate teenybopper. Who'd know, right? Next thing I know Swede kicks in my door, shoves my hand in the garbage disposal, turns it on! Look at it!" He waved the cast in my face. "I'll be screwed up for months. Swede says next time he'll grind my freakin' arm off to the elbow. And I believe him, man!"

I could see that he did. "How is the Swede tied into Monica Sorenson's car?"

"I don't *know,* man! Swede said sell the car, I sold it. If he said fly to the moon I'd start flappin' my arms! That's all I know!"

But it wasn't. He was lying. Had to be. A sheriff who maimed him for selling dope to a minor but didn't want a cut from a hot car? It didn't compute. There was something he wasn't telling me. But I'd only get one chance to ask him what it was.

Opening my door, I stepped out, keeping the gun centered on his chest.

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"Get out." He didn't move, paralyzed with fear. Reaching in, I grabbed his jacket collar and yanked him out over the seat, sending him sprawling in the snow.

"Get on your knees, Gunnar. I want this to look righteous."

"Ax, don't, please—"

"I told you not to lie to me again. We're done. Now get on your knees or I'll pop you right where you are."

"I'll pay you, man. I got money!" He was groveling, fumbling for his wallet, eyes wild.

"I'll pick you clean after." Moving behind him, I pressed the muzzle against his neck. "Close your eyes. Unless you want to see it coming."

"Please, man, don't!"

Leaning down, I whispered, "Last chance, Gunnar. The truth or you're gone."

"What truth, man? What do you want?"

"Straight up, what's the Swede's hustle? What's he into?"

"He'll kill me!"

"Wrong answer."

"Okay, okay! It's people, man. He's moving people!"

"What kind of people?"

"Illegal aliens. Russians. Russian mob guys, I think. Sometimes they buy dope from me, speed, weed, whatever. He uses the county patrol boat to smuggle 'em in from Canada."

"Then what happens to them?"

"I don't know. Sometimes their people pick 'em up. Or the Swede delivers 'em later on. Patrol car, patrol boat, he can take 'em anywhere he wants. No questions asked."

Except maybe one. Like, where did he stash them while they were waiting for their friends? Motel clerks would remember foreigners. . . . I felt sick to my stomach.

"What are you going to do with me?" Gunnar pleaded.

I didn't answer. He flinched when I slammed the car door. I left him kneeling by the side of the road, sniveling, waiting to get his head blown off. Not one of my prouder moments. But I could live with it.

I headed back to my starting point, the Sorenson cottage, lost in thought all the way.

The pathetic part was that I'd needed a loser like Gunnar to point out what was right under my nose. Burns Cove was in the middle of nowhere. But also in the middle of everywhere. By boat, car, or even a snowmobile when the lakes froze over, you could jump from any spot along the Canadian coastline to Chicago, Detroit, or Green Bay in a matter of hours. Anywhere at all.

Slipping across the mid-lake border would be a snap for the Swede. The Americans only patrol the invisible line hit and miss,

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the Canadians even less. And Lofgren would know their routines. Hell, they'd probably keep him posted as a professional courtesy.

For a Viking throwback raised in these waters, dodging the border patrols would be child's play. A boyhood game. No need for a dragon ship, a police launch would work even better.

Leif the Lucky? More like Swede the Smart. It was a beautiful scam. Foolproof. Almost.

Why risk arousing suspicion by checking the illegals into motels? When you have hundreds of vacant cottages, all neatly listed on an extended-surveillance sheet.

Clean up afterward and no one would even know they'd been there.

Unless a lovely young girl looking to shake a drug habit shows up at her family digs unexpectedly. And blunders into some Russian mobsters stoked to the gills on Gunnar's speed.

I didn't like thinking about what happened next. It didn't matter what I thought anyway. I couldn't prove any of it.

Unless I could manage to do what I'd been hired for in the first place. Find Monica.

At least I knew where to start. Parking my Camaro in front of the cottage, I began circling the house, widening my spiral by a few feet each time. Wasn't sure what I was looking for, exactly. A sign. Anything at all.

On the third loop, I found it. A discolored, dime-sized stain a few yards from the back deck, sheltered by an overhanging shrub. In the open, the snow was several inches deep. Here, only a light dusting.

Kneeling, I brushed the area clear with my fingertips. A cigarette butt. Unfiltered. Un-American. The brand was marked with a single Cyrillic letter. Russian. Damn.

So some of Swede's illegals had been here. And Monica must have walked in on them. And afterward the Swede told Gunnar to peddle her car. No paperwork, no trace. Which meant she wasn't coming back. So where was she?

One obvious place was in the deep water below. But it would be a long, slippery climb down to the beach toting a corpse, and I doubted they'd risk throwing a body down to the surf. Lake tides are tricky. Floaters can turn up at inconvenient times and places.

Smarter to bury the body in the woods. With luck, the snow would cover their handiwork and she wouldn't be found until spring. Or never.

But counting on a blanket of snow to cover a corpse isn't risk-free, either. Unless the body is deep-frozen, decomposition begins almost immediately and soon generates enough interior heat to make the process of decay self-sustaining. Only sub-zero temperatures will stop it completely. And it hadn't been that cold yet.

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If the grave wasn't deep, I wouldn't need to find footprints or a trail of cigarette butts. Only a low spot in the snow.

After fetching the army-surplus foxhole shovel I keep in the Camaro's trunk, I continued my spiral search. Made three false starts—dips in the snow caused by the wind or uneven ground. But in each case, a few scrapes of the shovel revealed undisturbed earth below.

But on the fourth . . .

The spot looked likely, hidden behind a copse of pines. And as I scraped away more surface snow, I knew. Churned earth. The topsoil along the shore is only a thin layer of mulch bonded to the sand cliffs by beach grass and the root systems of juniper and jack pines. They'd tried to camouflage the grave by spreading the earth around evenly, but the beach sand mixed in with the topsoil was . . . a dead giveaway.

Still, I had to be certain. Shedding my leather coat, I scraped the area clear of snow, revealing a disturbed patch of ground roughly three feet by six. Grave size. Damn it!

Beginning at what I hoped was the foot of the hole, I began scooping out the soil one shallow shovelful at a time, working carefully in an eighteen-inch square, trying to disturb the site as little as possible.

A little over a foot down, I bumped something. The sole of a shoe. Tossing the shovel aside, I knelt and began scraping the earth away with my hands. I didn't intend to uncover the body, just enough to be sure.

But the more I probed, the less sure I was. The sole was too damned big. It wasn't a woman's boot at all. It was a man's. What the hell?

Baffled, I started burrowing in the dirt like a coyote at a rabbit hole. Quickly pawed the leg clear. And discovered a second limb below it. An arm. Of another man. Both of them decomposing. The humid stench of decay welled up from the grave, gagging me.

I rose unsteadily, staring stupidly at the bodies in the earth, trying to make sense of it. And realized that I wasn't alone. Sheriff Swede Lofgren had eased out of the pines, watching me, the twelve-gauge shotgun cradled in his arm. He shook his head.

"That face of yours fooled me, Axton. I figured you for hired muscle."

"Sometimes I am."

"But not all the time. You're smarter than you look."

"Considering my looks, that's not saying much. I was listening for your car. That wasn't smart."

"Not very. I told you I've been prowling these woods since I was a kid. Don't."

"Don't what?"

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"Try to reach that shovel. Or pull your weapon." He shifted the shotgun muzzle slightly, centering it on my midsection. "You'll lose."

"Looks like I've lost already. What the hell happened here?"

"Bad judgment all around. My daughter has cerebral palsy and a county sheriff doesn't make much. A million Mexicans jump the Texas border every year. I figured if a few Russians want to buy their way in from Canada, what's the harm?"

"Even if they're mobsters?"

"That was my big mistake. I should have been choosier about my clients. Their mistake was killing that girl and expecting me to cover for them."

"Monica?"

"She showed up at the wrong place, wrong time. The Sorenson cottage is on my surveillance list, closed for the season. What was she doing here this time of year?"

"Had a fight with her boyfriend, needed a place to think. She was pregnant."

"My God." Lofgren swallowed, hard. And I glimpsed the rage and despair in his eyes. Which was probably the last thing the two Russians saw. Before he put them in the ground.

"What happens now?"

"I don't know." He took a deep breath, glancing around, as if seeing the bluff for the first time. Or the last. "It's a real mess, isn't it? Amateurish. It was my first time on the wrong side of the law. I guess it shows."

"Maybe you're not cut out for a life of crime. It's not too late to straighten out."

"Sure it is. The thing is, I'm not cut out for prison, either."

I heard the finality in his tone. He'd been chewing over his options as we talked. And he'd decided. The same way he'd decided about the two Russians. I dove to the left, clawing for my weapon. But the Swede was right. I lost.

I woke in a grave. Facedown, dirt in my mouth. Breathing the foul stench of decay. But breathing. Opened my eyes, but couldn't see much. I was sprawled across the bodies of the Russians. But I hadn't joined them in death. Not quite yet.

Risked raising my head an inch, looking around. Didn't see Lofgren. Which didn't mean he wasn't there. But it didn't matter. I couldn't bear one more second of the godawful reek. I staggered to my feet. A big mistake.

The earth lurched, I stumbled over a dead Russian and went down again. Hard. My head was buzzing and I could feel blood trickling from my earlobe. Touched my temple gingerly with my fingertips. They came away bloody. Tried to remember what happened.

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I'd reached for my weapon. Lofgren must have clipped me with the shotgun butt. My gun was gone. So was Lofgren.

Wasn't sure how long I'd been unconscious. Looked at my watch but couldn't seem to make sense of it. I'd been out awhile, though. I was freezing, cold to the bone, and the blood on my face was already drying.

I stood up again, more carefully this time. Wobbled a little, but managed to stay upright. Looked around, took stock. I was standing in the grave. Injured. Couldn't tell how seriously. Which was a bad sign. Concussions can kill you and the first symptom is disorientation. I qualified. In spades.

Needed help. Fumbled for my cell phone. Gone. Like the gun. Probably just as well. 911 might bring Lofgren back. To finish the job.

Started for my car, one unsteady step at a time. Didn't make it. Kept hearing a buzzing in my head. Took me a moment to realize the noise was real. Coming from the bluff.

I stumbled back to the deck, following the sound. The buzz was an engine. A powerboat roaring out of the harbor at Burns Cove. A county patrol boat, throttle wide open, rocketing through the bergs and breakers like a maritime halfback, headed for the open water where he could swing northeast toward the Canadian shore.

I had to find a phone. Unless I alerted the Coast Guard, Lofgren could vanish into Canada. If that was his intent.

I'll never know. Half a mile out, the patrol boat slammed into an ice floe at full speed. Maybe he misjudged the distance. Maybe he meant to hit it. I only know the boat never swerved. Punched into that berg like a truck hitting a train.

The collision flipped the powerboat. It went airborne, engine howling, then smashed to splinters on the floe. And exploded. Sending a greasy fireball roiling up into the steel-gray overcast, smoke churning skyward as a curtain of snowflakes descended, whiting out my view.

It didn't matter. I'd seen enough to know there were no survivors. Which was probably just as well. Swede was right. He wasn't cut out for prison. He was better off . . . wherever he was now.

In hell.

Or maybe . . . in Viking heaven. With Eric the Red, Leif, and the rest. They weren't saints, those old raiders. Sacking cities, looting churches. The Swede's mistakes were small stuff compared to theirs. Maybe they'd make room at the table for him. Drink a toast to his luck. In . . .

Viking heaven. I tried to focus. Couldn't seem to think.

What was the name of that place? ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

BRASS MONKEY

by Reginald Hill

"By the cringe!" said DCI Peter Pascoe, his teeth chattering together like tiny icebergs. "It must be twenty below."

"Aye. Grand weather for tracking a brass monkey," said Andy Dalziel gleefully, adjusting his binoculars.

He stood there, bulky as a polar bear and apparently as impervious to cold, peering down the tree-scattered slope to the house below. Is he human? wondered Pascoe, stamping his rapidly numbing feet in the snow.

More importantly, is he right?

The windows of Hollybush Grange glowed gold, and before it the tall shapely tree, which presumably provided its name, was festooned with fairy lights and topped with a gossamer-winged angel poised for flight. It looked more like a traditional Christmas card than a villain's lair.

"Sure this is the right place, sir?" he asked.

"Sure as if I'd been led by a star," said the Fat Man.

In fact, the light which led them to this frozen rendezvous had been lit by an exploding lasagna rather than a helpful deity.

©2002 by Reginald Hill

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Two weeks earlier a woman in the cafeteria at Mid-Yorkshire's famous Helm Museum in scenic Narrowdale had complained her snack wasn't properly defrosted. The overworked waitress replaced the dish in the microwave. A minute later, the oven exploded in flames.

The fire spread rapidly, or at least its smoke did, filling the building and setting off the state-of-the-art fire alarm whose fearful screech made it physically impossible for any human being to stay inside.

Except, that is, for a burly man in a Russian fur hat fitted with what must have been industrial-strength ear muffs, who had been admiring the Helm's most treasured possession, the Cellini Monkey.

In January of 2002 Delacorte published the nineteenth book in the Dalziel and Pascoe series by Reginald Hill. "Permeated with [Hill's] sly and delightful sense of humor," said the *Christian Science Monitor* of the book. Dalziel and Pascoe were the protagonists of Mr. Hill's very first published novel, *A Clubbable Woman* (1970), and they're as fresh and likable today, in books and in stories such as this, as they were then. ¶

This was a figure, about ten inches high, of an ape of indeterminate species, exquisitely wrought in gold and adorned with precious stones, which the great Florentine artist had wrought for a daughter of the Medici. Its value was said to exceed all of the other exhibits put together.

Once alone, the man stepped across the velvet rope separating him from the display area, lit a cook's blowtorch, and directed the flame at a sensor in the wall which, at a temperature of 200 degrees Celsius, released the electronic locks on the display cabinets.

A moment later, with the monkey in a poacher's pocket inside his capacious overcoat, he was pursuing his fellow punters to the exit.

Naturally all this activity triggered other alarms, but they were no match for the screaming siren, and it wasn't till the fire was brought under control that the theft was discovered.

Andy Dalziel was just getting his teeth into the case when news came through that the NCS were taking it over.

"NC bloody S!" snarled Dalziel. "You know what that stands for?"

"The National Crime Squad?" suggested Pascoe.

"No. *Never Caught Short.* They gobble up all the glory, but if things go wrong, they walk away and leave the locals to clean up the mess. Flash bastards!"

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The formation of the NCS a few years earlier had been aimed at providing a law-enforcement agency whose remit was to deal with major crime and whose authority wasn't limited by the boundaries of local police forces. The fact that its officers were recruited from the Criminal Investigation Departments of these same local forces was meant to have prevented the kind of rivalries and antagonisms existing between cops and the FBI in the States, but inevitably, to many of the older denizens of CID who'd seen everything and got scars to prove it, NCS officers either got the job because they were born flash bastards or they became flash bastards as a condition of doing the job.

The flash bastard in this instance was DCI Dai Davison, who looked about eighteen, sported a Welsh Rugby Union tie, and wore trousers so tight they made Dalziel's eyes water just to look at them. "Jesus!" he muttered to Pascoe, "here's me trying to do a man's work and they've sent us the Boyo David!" before putting on his village-idiot face to greet the new arrival.

The Boyo, speaking very slowly, explained that the NCS's theory was that the Cellini figure had been stolen for use in the international drugs market. "Big money leaves a big trail," he said. "So the major traffickers are into barter. To them, all the Cellini Monkey represents is a million-dollar marker."

"You mean they'll use it as brass!" exclaimed Dalziel, his look of rustic astonishment terrible to behold. "D'you hear that, Pete? This is really a brass monkey they stole."

And so the Cellini figure was christened.

The Boyo's team hung around Mid-Yorkshire for several days, during which time the Fat Man overwhelmed them with cooperation. Requested to provide an officer with detailed local knowledge, he immediately asked Uniformed if they could spare PC Hector for plainclothes duties. They gave him up with tears of gratitude and mirth.

Pascoe was horrified.

"Last time they let him out on patrol, an old lady had to show him the way back to the station!" he reminded Dalziel.

"Aye, he'll really test their commitment," said the Fat Man, looking with delight on Hector who, with his expression of haunted vacancy and a shiny black suit a size too small, could have been a Victorian undertaker's mute. "I give 'em two days."

It took only one for the Boyo David to decide the monkey was by now probably several continents away. He took his leave, pursued by smiling reassurances that if anything relevant came up in Mid-Yorkshire, he would be the first to know.

But as the Boyo's gleaming BMW vanished from sight, the smiles faded, too.

"Right," said Dalziel. "Now we can get started."

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He was convinced the monkey was still on his patch, and quickly spread the word among his snouts that if they brought glad tidings before Christmas, their reward would be a choice of gold or frankincense, but if they withheld even the scrappiest scrap of information, they'd better stock up on myrrh.

Pascoe watched all this with some uneasiness, having strong suspicions that the Boyo's ears had more chance of being pleasured by Madonna's tongue than by the entry of any information thus garnered.

On the morning of December twentieth, Dalziel got a phone call and left the office alone. Some time later he returned, whistling a merry tune. For the next couple of days he was hard to find. But on the third day he reappeared again after lunch.

Pascoe went to see him, but paused at the closed door as he heard a strange voice within. It was saying in a hoarse, very broad Scots accent, "Aye, Hollytree or bush maybe, in Borrowdale, that's what I said. Aye, Borrowdale, Cumbria, is there anither? And it's this selfsame nicht, definite!"

Pascoe went back to his desk. When he returned to Dalziel's room later, he found the door ajar. The Fat Man was alone, studying a folder. Pascoe glimpsed the name *Palliser Estates* before it was slid out of sight.

"Thinking of moving, sir?" he said lightly.

"Somewhere I can get a bit of privacy, mebbe," growled Dalziel. "What do you want?"

Before Pascoe could reply, the phone rang. Dalziel picked it up, listened, then banged it down.

"Snout," he said. "Reckons he might have something on the brass monkey."

Pascoe stood up and said, "Let's go."

When interviewing registered informants, two officers were required.

Dalziel said indifferently, "No. Probably a waste of time. I'll take Novello. Show her how it's done."

But when he returned, he was much more excited.

He said, "Ivor 'ull tell you the tale. I need to ring the Boyo."

The tale WPC "Ivor" Novello told was of a meeting with a snout who'd passed on the information that the gang who'd stolen the monkey were possibly hiding out at Hollybush Hall on the edge of Narrowdale, not twenty miles from the museum.

She'd been impressed by her boss's surprisingly subtle technique.

"This guy was really nervous. But Mr. Dalziel put him at his ease with a glance, got the info, and sent him on his way. That's the way to handle snouts, I thought."

Pascoe didn't like the feel of this. In his experience, the Fat

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Man's handling of informants involved fistfuls of shirt and hurricanes of hot breath. Also the memory of the Scotsman he'd overheard talking about a house called Holly something in Borrowdale, Cumbria, kept coming back. Surely there had to be a connection . . . ?

But the Fat Man, on his return, made no mention of this.

"They say the Boyo's off on some urgent case. Probably broken up for the Christmas hols already, idle buggers. Any road, I've left a message. And I've had a word with the chief. He agreed we should set up a discreet observation. Ten bodies should do it."

"Ten?" exclaimed Pascoe. "For observation? What is this place? Some kind of palace?"

"Better safe than sorry. See if Uniformed can lend us a few. I want 'em in plainclothes. Don't want to draw attention. Go on, Pete. Chop-chop!"

The duty uniformed inspector was unenthusiastic, but offered three men, as long as one of them was Hector, who'd been boring them all with tales of his exciting NCS attachment. Dalziel groaned and said, "Needs must when the devil drives!" But he still didn't mention the Scotsman.

It was already dark when the little convoy finally set off, led by Pascoe driving Dalziel, who sat nursing his mobile phone.

"Expecting a call, sir?" he said.

"You wha'?" said Dalziel, looking at the phone as if it had emerged from his fly. "No. Why should I be?"

The phone rang.

He put it to his ear, listened, said, "You're sure? Thanks."

To Pascoe he said, "New info. My snout reckons there could be some kind of exchange fixed for tonight."

"Exchange? What kind of exchange?"

"Drugs, he's heard. Some Krauts. All right, don't look like you've sucked a lemon, Germans, I mean."

But it wasn't political correctness that was causing Pascoe to look unhappy. It was his growing sense of performance, which deepened as the Fat Man now rang NCS, expressed histrionic exasperation on learning Davison was still unavailable, and left another message for him to get in touch urgently.

"Shouldn't you have mentioned where we're going?" he said.

"He can always ask a policeman," said the Fat Man, pulling out the Palliser Estates folder, which Pascoe was not surprised to see contained details of Hollybush, including a map of the grounds, copies of which Dalziel passed on to Sergeant Wield to aid him in the disposition of his troops when they rendezvoused in the woods flanking the approach to the house.

Pascoe didn't bother asking how these useful bits of literature

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happened to be in the Fat Man's possession. The whole thing stank, and the less he knew, the better.

But as he stood there freezing in the snow, he decided that the risk of losing his toes as well as the risk of Dalziel losing his job required one more effort to get the Fat Man to abandon this dubious operation.

"Sir," he began.

"Hush!" said the Fat Man.

"What?"

"Did you not hear summat?"

Pascoe strained his ears. There was something . . . a long way away . . . rising . . . fading . . .

"Carol singers," he said. "Must be from the village. Sound really travels in the cold."

"Aye. Too bloody far sometimes."

Pascoe looked at him curiously

"How do you mean?" he said.

"I were just recalling my Great-Uncle Hamish," said Dalziel. "He often stayed with us at Christmas, and one frosty night much like this him and me were coming back from a walk in the park when he stopped and stared up at this line of trees, like he were listening. I said, 'What is it, Uncle Hamish?' and he said, 'D'ye no hear it, laddie?' And he began to croon this carol, 'Silent Night' it was, only the words he were singing were in German. *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,* that's what he sang. He'd served in the Great War, didn't talk about it much, but one thing he did talk about was Christmas nineteen fourteen—how the Germans sang carols, and the Tommies sang back, and then they all came out of the trenches, carrying bottles of booze, and they played football together, and got drunk together. And I'll tell you a strange thing, Pete. When he said, 'D'ye no hear it, laddie?' and I strained my ears, blow me if after a bit I didn't hear it, and in German, too! Like the man said to Horace, there's more things in heaven and earth, eh?"

"Oh, yes," said Pascoe, deeply affected, not so much by the story as the Scots accent Dalziel had put on when quoting his uncle.

Either the ghost of Great-Uncle Hamish had been in the Fat Man's office that afternoon or—his mind rapidly supplied the more likely explanation—or Dalziel had been on the phone to Davison, making sure he was well out of the way on a wild-goose chase up in Cumbria when the carefully staged delivery of this "new" information he'd probably got from his snout at least three days ago came through!

If any of this ever came out, Dalziel would be lucky to save his pension, let alone his job. Only complete success—drugs confis-

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cated, bodies in the cells, and the brass monkey recovered—could keep him secure.

He opened his mouth to remonstrate, but the Fat Man said excitedly, "Hey, look there. This could be it."

Pascoe looked. Distantly he could see the line of the road picked out by the headlights of a car.

Dalziel was on his radio, talking urgently.

Pascoe said, "They're turning into the lane."

"Yes . . . yes . . . Wieldy's onto it. It's a Merc, four passengers."

"And how many in the house?" wondered Pascoe. "We could be outgunned."

"Only two inside," said Dalziel confidently. "And no guns with this lot, guaranteed."

"What about this other lot?" said Pascoe.

A second set of headlights had appeared, slowed, then turned out of sight into the wooded lane.

"Who the hell's that?" exclaimed Dalziel angrily. "Hello, hello! Wieldy, have you died down there?"

Sergeant Wield's voice came crackling back.

"It's a minibus, sir. Crowded . . . there's kids in it . . . and women . . . they've got lanterns . . ."

"It's them sodding carol singers!" exclaimed Dalziel. "Stop them! Do you hear me? Stop them! Don't let them past!"

And that was when things started going seriously wrong.

Down below, Detective Sergeant Edgar Wield had disposed his officers according to Dalziel's instructions. When it came to PC Hector, the instruction had been simple. "Put the bugger out of harm's way!" Hector, once more in his old black suit, looked so completely frozen that Wield had taken pity on him and put him in a tumbledown outhouse with the strict command, "Stay in here unless Mr. Dalziel himself orders you out!"

Hector had spent the next hour studying the instruction sheet on how to use his portable radio. Finally, triumphantly, he managed to switch it on.

And the first thing his frost-numbed brain heard was his master's unmistakable voice screaming, "Stop them! Don't let them past!"

He rushed to the outhouse door and saw a golden glow of headlights pouring down the lane which led to the house.

And he obeyed.

From his vantage point up the slope Pascoe watched in horror.

The Merc came speeding down the snow-covered track to the house. Into its path floundered the cadaverous figure of Hector, waving and shouting. The terrified driver hauled the wheel over, the car skidded in the snow and rammed the festive holly tree.

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The fairy lights went into spasm and the angel's angle of flight changed from takeoff to nosedive. Steam jetted out of the Merc's bonnet. The doors opened. Four men fell out. Two were clutching suitcases, and one of the others was clutching something Pascoe didn't want to believe in. They all started running towards the house.

Hector tried to grapple with the unencumbered one, a tall athletic-looking figure who with practiced ease caught him in a wristlock and twisted his arm up behind his back.

Edgar Wield appeared from the lane, yelling.

And the man with the something Pascoe now had to acknowledge was a shotgun swung it in his direction and fired.

There was a high-pitched agonized shriek and Wield went facedown in the snow.

The house door had opened. The men with the cases vanished inside, closely followed by the tall man dragging Hector with him, and finally, after one last defiant flourish, the man with the shotgun.

Then all was still below and the only noise Pascoe could hear was his own heavy breathing as he floundered down the snow-covered hillside in his master's steps while his thoughts too floundered through drifts of dreadful speculation.

An unauthorized operation, NCS deceived, a policeman taken hostage, a shot fired, Wieldy lying wounded in the snow . . . or worse . . .

Mother of God! After a career signposted by burnt bridges and downtrodden enemies, was this at last the end of Andy Dalziel?

The good news was that it wasn't the end of Edgar Wield.

As they reached the bottom of the slope, a figure like the Abominable Snowman rose before them. They each seized an arm and kept on going till they reached the shelter of Hector's outbuilding.

"Right, Wieldy," gasped Pascoe. "Lie down. Where are you hit?"

"I'm not bloody hit," said the sergeant with some irritation. "I just took a dive when I heard that gun."

"So why did you squeal like a stuffed pig?" demanded Dalziel.

"That weren't me, that was some poor sodding owl," said Wield. "I hope it were just scared."

"With my luck, I'll likely get done by the RSPB," said Dalziel gloomily. "Right, sit-rep. What's happened with them sodding singers?"

"Well, they've not showed up down here, so I presume they're safe up the lane."

"Thank God. What idiot let their coach turn in?"

"That 'ud be you, sir," said Wield. "You said, no interference with any vehicle approaching the house."

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Dalziel glowered into the sergeant's famously ugly face and said, "You want to watch it, Wieldy, else I might buy you a mirror for Christmas."

But the insult lacked its usual force.

Reassured about his friend's condition, Pascoe now took stock of their situation. It wasn't good. Moonlight spilled through the fractured roof of the tumbledown outhouse to put its otherworldly touch on rusty garden tools, broken deck chairs, a slightly deflated red and yellow football. And there was something deflated about Andy Dalziel, too. After his crack at Wield, he relapsed into a sullen silence, staring down at the rubbish-strewn floor as if he saw there some image of his own future.

Pascoe said urgently, "Sir, we can't just stand here doing nothing. We need to let NCS know what's happened, and we need to get an armed response team deployed as soon as possible. As for the carol singers, we should get them moved back to the village, then set up a one-mile exclusion zone, traffic diversions, the lot."

Each point seemed to punch another hole in the Fat Man's casing. He continued standing there, head down, for another long minute.

Finally he took a deep breath, as if trying to restore his old bulk, and said, "You're right. No use freezing here like three brass monkeys. Wieldy, tell the lads to hold their positions but do nowt without my say-so. We don't want dead heroes."

"You think they might make a break for it?" said Pascoe, who'd already been examining the possibility.

"Doubt it. They'd need to go cross-country on foot. Their car's knackered, and all the Penders have got is a sporty two-seater."

"Who the hell are the Penders?" asked Pascoe.

"Couple who rent Hollybush. You'll have seen 'em on the Helm security video. Homework, that's the secret of success, lad," said Dalziel. "Have I learned you nowt?"

The thought of asking the Fat Man what particular success he believed this bit of homework was the secret of flashed across Pascoe's mind, but kicking Andy Dalziel when he was down was likely to break your toe.

"Very good, sir," he said. "But they're armed and have a hostage. What if they threaten to cut up Hector unless we supply transport?"

"Tell them to start with his brain," said Dalziel. "That should take time to find. Ivor, that you skulking out there?"

WDC Shirley Novello, who'd been lurking in the doorway observing the discomfiture of the Holy Trinity not without a little schadenfreude, stepped into the moonlight.

"Get yourself up the lane to them carol singers," commanded the Fat Man. "Tell them there's nowt to worry about, bit of trouble

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with poachers in case they heard the shotgun. Oh, and while you're at it, give them this,"—he took a couple of notes out of his wallet and handed them over—"and ask them if they'd sing us a carol afore they go. 'Silent Night' 'ud be nice. My favorite."

He's gone mad, thought Pascoe. Uncle Hamish has come to haunt him.

Novello looked at Pascoe, who nodded. She left. Then he turned his attention to Dalziel, who gave him what looked like an approving wink.

"Andy," he said pleadingly. "Shouldn't you be ringing the Squad? We're running out of time."

For answer, the Fat Man picked up the brightly colored football and started bouncing it off the wall. It can't have been punctured, and as the air inside got warmer, it began to recover its old shape and resilience.

Like Dalziel in the past, thought Pascoe. Hit him hard and he reinflates! But there was no way he could bounce back from this situation.

"Sir," he said in a harsh formal tone, "I've got to warn you, if you won't ring the Squad, I will."

He hadn't wanted to utter the threat, but it had to be spoken. The *Titanic* was going down. Unless something was done, they could all be sucked under by the turbulence.

"Well, thank you kindly, Mr. Christian," said Dalziel. "You follow your conscience, Pete. Me, I've got other things to do."

"What, for God's sake!" demanded Pascoe.

There was a second of confrontational silence. Then distantly, eerily, a sound came floating through the air.

Silent night . . . holy night . . .

"How about a little game of footie for starters?" said Dalziel.

And before they could stop him, he stepped out of the outhouse, booted the ball towards Hollybush, and trotted after it.

"What the hell's he doing?" demanded Wield.

"Oh God," groaned Pascoe. "He thinks he can declare a truce like they did in the Great War!"

"You going to ring the squad, Pete?"

Pascoe knew he should. But he knew he couldn't. Not yet, not with that pathetic figure out there, trying to keep the ball in the air.

"Anything else happens, you ring them, Wieldy."

"What'll you be doing?"

"Showing the terror of Twickers how to play a real ball game."

And with the deep sigh of a man who knows he's doing something unbelievably stupid, Pascoe trotted slowly forward.

"This ball's the wrong sodding shape," complained the Fat Man, who was a rugger man through and through.

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"Give it here," ordered Pascoe.

Dalziel threw it to him. He caught it on his thigh, bounced it on his right knee a couple of times, and then, as the skills of his youth gradually creaked back into life, he lofted it high and got in three headers before it dropped into the snow.

"By God, I'd love to have seen you in *Swan Lake,*" mocked Dalziel, taking out a hip flask and putting it to his lips.

"Belt up," said Pascoe. "We've got company."

The house door had opened and a man stepped out. It was the tall athletic man who'd seized Hector. He was in his thirties and dressed in black trousers and a rather sharp black jacket over a black turtleneck. He held his arms wide, probably to show he was unarmed, but Pascoe took it as an invitation for a pass and lobbed the ball to him. He took it on his head, nodded it down, and volleyed it with great force straight at Dalziel. The Fat Man didn't flinch but caught it one-handed in front of his face.

Now the three of them stood still while high above them through the cold bright air floated the lyrics of "Silent Night."

"Gentlemen, please introduce yourselves," said the man in a faintly Germanic accent.

"I'm Detective Superintendent Dalziel of Mid-Yorkshire CID," said the Fat Man. "This is Chief Inspector Pascoe, and the man you've kidnapped is Police Constable Hector, and I'd like him back."

"Good Lord," said the tall man. "Is the man who attacked us really a policeman? He keeps on claiming so, but I found it hard to believe."

Dalziel laughed. "Me too, sometimes. Is he okay?"

"A little incoherent. He keeps telling us we are surrounded by cruise missiles and the SAS. But I think he has the wrong war. With the snow and the football and the carols, this is more like Christmas in no man's land in nineteen fourteen, eh?"

"A historian, are you?" said Dalziel.

"I try to learn from history," said the man. "So tell me what you want, Superintendent. It's very cold."

"Aye, what we call brass-monkey weather," said Dalziel, taking a swig from his flask. "In fact, it's so cold, my brain's half frozen, which is why I've got to think aloud. And what I'm thinking is this. What are we all doing here? I can tell you why I'm here. A tipoff. We get 'em all the time. Most of 'em are a waste of time, but we've got to follow them up. So I'm here 'cos I got told I might see summat to my advantage. All I've seen so far is four men turning up with suitcases. Question is, why are they here? Could be they've come to spend Christmas with friends. Could be they're hoping to do a bit of rough shooting, which 'ud explain why they brought a shotgun."

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He paused to take another drink.

"Thirsty work, thinking aloud," he said, proffering the flask.

"And listening, too," said the man, taking it. "Go on."

"So what have we got?" resumed Dalziel. "Gents turn up for a Christmas break and suddenly there's a lot of shouting and people jumping out of the bushes. If that happened to me, I wouldn't ask questions, I'd reckon I were being mugged and head for cover. Gun goes off in self-defense, someone makes a citizen's arrest on one of the attackers, that would be perfectly understandable, too."

Pascoe couldn't believe this. He stepped forward to speak but the Fat Man's elbow in his ribs silenced him.

The man in black nodded emphatically. "Precisely what happened to me and my friends," he said. "But the police I think would still want to ask questions, make searches?"

"Oh aye. Cops ask, lawyers answer, everyone goes home," said Dalziel. "It's the way of the world. As for searches, you can't find what's not there. God, but it's chill! Goes right to your bladder, this air. I expect after a long drive you and your friends will be all queuing up for the bog."

"The bog?" echoed the man.

"Bathroom. Lavatory. Loo. I daresay you'd need to use it quite a bit to make yourselves feel comfortable afore we go off to meet your lawyer. No need to rush."

The man in black was regarding him speculatively. "You are local police, you say?"

"What else would we be?"

"I am a foreign national, Mr. Dalziel, a totally innocent foreign national, of course, but I have read somewhere that here in England serious crimes, especially those with an international dimension, have been taken out of the hands of local forces and are now dealt with by what I think is called your National Crime Squad."

"You're certainly well informed, sir," said Dalziel admiringly. "But I don't see any reason for the National Crime Squad to be involved in a little local mix-up, do you? Getting them down here flexing their muscles wouldn't do either of us much good, would it?"

Suddenly the man smiled as if everything had become clear.

"Prosit," he said, taking another swig from the flask before handing it back. "Yes, fifteen minutes should be fine."

Then he turned on his heel and went back inside.

"Sir!" exploded Pascoe.

"Not in front of the servants, lad," said Dalziel, striding back to the outhouse.

Once inside he said, "All right, spit it out afore you choke on it."

"You can't do this, sir. It's just plain wrong."

"Wrong? They've got Hector in there, remember?"

"Come off it! This isn't about Hector. This is about saving your

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skin! There's a gang of drug dealers in there flushing the evidence down the pan on your instructions so you can keep your job!"

"Nobody's perfect," said Dalziel.

"It won't even work!" said Pascoe desperately. "Not for you, anyway. Yes, some sharp brief will probably get them clear, but everyone in the job will know the truth. You don't imagine Davison and his masters are going to let you get away scot-free? Screwing up is bad, but there's some dignity in putting up your hand for it. Trying to cover up by letting these scumbags walk free is unforgivable."

"You'll not be contributing to my going-away prezzie then?" said Dalziel.

For a moment the two old colleagues stood toe-to-toe like a pair of bare-knuckle pugilists.

Then Wield, who'd stepped outside when the row began, called, "The door's opening. He's chucked the shotgun out. He's waving us over."

Inside the warm house, Pascoe's feet began to thaw, but that was the least of his pains.

They were met by the tenants of Hollybush, the Penders, a handsome young couple with cut-glass accents whose reaction to events was a carefully judged mixture of righteous indignation and noblesse oblige. They confirmed that the Germans were old friends and honored guests, come to enjoy an English Christmas and do a bit of rough shooting over the holiday. Pascoe tried to spot some usable resemblance between them and the couple on the Helm security video, but found none. Not even the remarkable sight of Fat Andy grovelling in apology could divert his mind from its growing sense of angry frustration.

As expected, the suitcases contained nothing but clothing. Hector was no help whatsoever. He couldn't recall anything incriminating being said in his presence, but he did report that there'd been a great deal of toilet flushing during the last fifteen minutes of his ordeal. "Thought they must be getting worried because of what I told them about the penalties for kidnapping a police officer," he concluded proudly.

The Germans, meanwhile, sat at their ease in front of a roaring fire, drinking brandy and chatting away about football.

"So how much of your money's gone down the drain then?" interrupted Pascoe, desperate to score some kind of hit. "Half a mil? More?"

The man in black laughed and said, "Don't know what you mean, but in any case, what's money? What is it you English say? Money doesn't grow on trees? I have news for you. In some parts of the world, it really does!"

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He had to translate his bon mot to one of his compatriots whose English wasn't so good, and the four of them fell about laughing.

Their self-possession remained undented even when Dalziel apologetically invited them to let themselves be taken down to police headquarters to tie up some loose ends. The man in black smilingly replied that in anticipation of this he'd already arranged for his lawyer to rendezvous with them there.

Assuring their hosts they'd be back soon, they departed.

Pascoe, without consulting the Fat Man, had requested the Penders' permission to search the house. They gave it without a moment's hesitation, which didn't fill him with much hope of a successful outcome.

He left Wield to supervise the search. He wanted to stick close to Dalziel, who'd sunk into a big chair by the roaring fire. At the moment, he didn't trust him not to offer the Penders some sort of deal. Not that they seemed in the mood for negotiation. In fact, everything about their manner suggested they were completely unworried.

"What on earth are you looking for, anyway?" enquired the woman. "Or is that an official secret?"

"You'll laugh," said Dalziel. "It's a monkey. The brass monkey, we call it."

"A monkey? Good lord, you don't mean the Cellini Monkey that was stolen from the Helm? And you think it might be hidden here? How bizarre!"

"Aye, well, I get these daft ideas. Time of life, I reckon," said Dalziel. "I could murder a cup of tea."

"Certainly. Earl Grey all right?"

"Why not? Drop of this brandy in it 'ull give it a bit of body."

Some time later Wield appeared at the door shaking his head.

Dalziel finished his tea noisily and stood up.

"Sorry to have disturbed your evening, folks," he said. "We'd best be off to make sure your friends get back to you as soon as possible."

The Penders saw them to the door, showing graciousness in victory.

Outside in the snow Dalziel said, "Make sure we've got everything. Don't want to disturb these good folks again. Who's got that shotgun?"

Novello held up the bag into which it had been placed.

"Let's have a look," said Dalziel.

And to Pascoe's horror he reached in and took the weapon out of the bag. The old sod was determined to contaminate even what little evidence they had.

"Nice balance," said the Fat Man, hefting the weapon. "Even with the short barrel. Used to be a dab hand at the old clay pigeons myself."

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So saying, he raised it to his shoulder. Above him towered the holly tree. Its lights had settled down, but the angel still hung precariously. It reminded Pascoe of a photo he'd seen of the shell-blasted Basilica at Albert with its Golden Virgin leaning parallel to the ground from the ruined tower. The night seemed full of images of the First World War.

And he recalled that on the Front, popular mythology had said the war would end when the statue fell.

Perhaps Dalziel felt the same.

"Put it out of its misery, shall we?" he said, squeezing the trigger.

They heard the shot ripping up through the foliage. Snow melted. Fairy lights exploded. And the angel, separated from its supporting branch, nose-dived to the ground, which it hit with a most unangelic thud.

Everyone stood stock-still till the thunderous echoes of the gunshot had rolled to silence across the frosty sky.

Then Wield moved forward and stooped to pick the fairy up.

He let out a grunt of surprise at its weight, then turned to Dalziel, cradling the ornament in his arms like a child.

"Sir," he said. "It's the monkey."

But Pascoe did not need his words. He'd been watching the faces of the Penders in the doorway, and the truth was written clearly there. No wonder they hadn't been worried by a house search!

"Bit of damage, I'm afraid," said Wield, stripping off the angelic gauze. "Reckon you might have some explaining to do to the insurers."

The shotgun pellets and the impact with the ground certainly hadn't done Cellini's masterpiece any favors, but Dalziel only laughed.

"Not to worry, lad," he said, turning to the couple in the doorway. "Don't think it will help your defense, but you've been done. You see, Mr. and Mrs. Pender, it really is a brass monkey and all them lovely gems are nowt but paste. The insurers insist the real one's kept safe in a bank vault. I should have thought a couple of clever crooks like you would have known that. Now wrap up warm. Don't want you catching cold on your drive to the station, do we?"

As they stood in front of Hollybush Hall watching the cars vanish up the lane, Pascoe said, "You knew all along the real monkey was safe?"

"Aye, but I made sure I were the only one. They've got big gobs at NCS. If word got out it were a worthless copy that had been stolen, there'd have been no incentive for the Germans to come, would there? But I'd no idea where it were hid till yon car hit the tree and I noticed how it leaned over. Good old Hector did us a favor. I may not kill him after all!"

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He sounded so pleased with himself that Pascoe found it hard to point out what should have been obvious. But it had to be said.

"Look, sir, it's great that we've got the Penders, but they're not going to make things worse for themselves by admitting to a drugs deal, are they? And with all the evidence gone down the bog, we've no chance of making anything stick against the Germans."

"In other words, you still think it's going-away prezzie time?"

"Without the drugs, it's still going to look like a real cockup," said Pascoe sadly. "There'll be an enquiry, and NCS will be out for your blood."

"You reckon? Here, let me show you something."

He took the Palliser Estates folder out of his inside pocket, opened it at the sketch map of the house and its grounds, and led the way along the side of the building and down the garden at the back. Once more Pascoe found himself treading in his master's steps.

Finally the Fat Man came to a halt.

"Here we are," he said, kicking at the snow. "Get ahold of that and pull."

That was a manhole cover.

With some difficulty Pascoe raised one end.

"Hell's bells," he said, averting his face.

"Aye, pungent, ain't it?" said the Fat Man, breathing in deeply like an oenophile sampling the bouquet of a fine old wine. "No mains drainage, see? This is Hollybush's septic tank. Everything comes here, and with the overflow frozen solid, everything stays here, too. Them Krauts wouldn't have thought for one moment a place like this might not have modern plumbing with everything being swished away out to sea. We'll need to get all this lot down to the lab, of course, to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. Might leave that to the Boyo David, let the *Never Caught Short* mob clean up the mess for a change."

Pascoe let the cover fall back into place with a clang.

"You knew about this when you conned that German with all that Christmas truce stuff, didn't you?"

"He conned himself. You heard him say he'd learned the lesson of history. Mebbe he didn't learn enough."

"Meaning?" said Pascoe.

Dalziel chuckled richly, like bubbles passing through a poteen still.

He said, "Another thing Great-Uncle Hamish told me on our way home from the park that night was that while they were boozing and singing carols and playing football with the Germans at Christmas, him and his mates took a careful note of their strength and disposition. Day after Boxing Day, they launched a surprise attack and knocked hell out of them."

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He laughed at the thought. Pascoe didn't join in, and the Fat Man's laughter faded and he looked at his colleague speculatively.

"Tell me, Pete, you said you were going to ring the squad yourself and break the bad news. You had the chance. Why'd you not do it?"

"Don't know," said Pascoe. "Maybe I really have learned the lesson of history. Listen!"

"What?"

Pascoe cupped his ear and strained his eyes up to the line of trees running along the crest of the snowy slope where they'd kept watch at the start of the evening.

"Thought I heard someone singing a carol, sir. Yes, there it is . . . '*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*' . . . do you not hear it?"

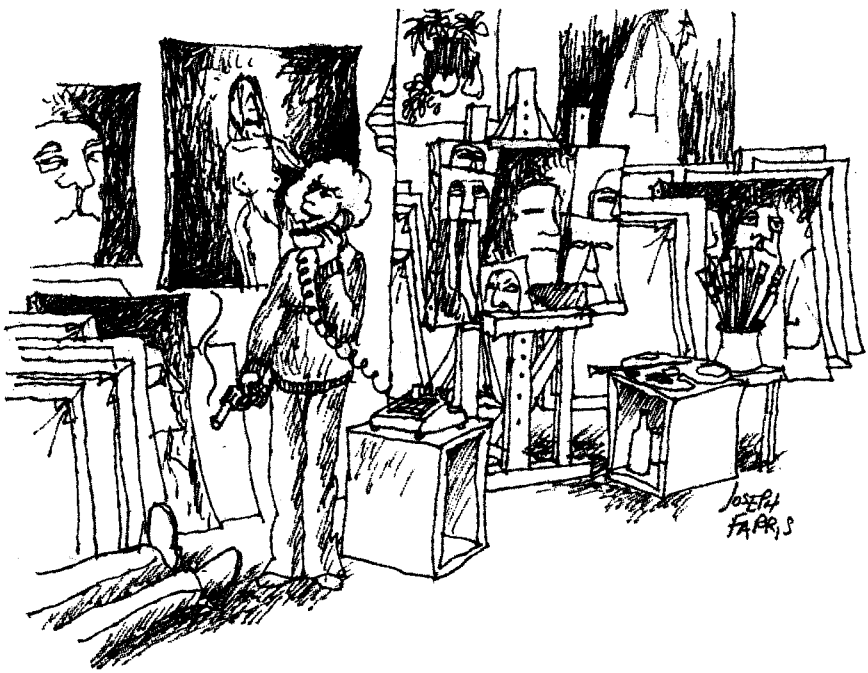
For a moment Dalziel listened, then he swung his fist and punched Pascoe on the arm.

"Bog off, buggerlugs!" he exclaimed. "You had me going for a moment there."

"Thought I had you going forever half an hour back," said Pascoe, grinning through his pain. "Shall we head somewhere a bit warmer? I think I can make it back to the house with a bit of help."

"Glad to hear it. There's a brandy bottle there I don't think we searched thoroughly. Merry Christmas, lad."

And arm in arm the two men made their way back to Hollybush through the bitter weather. ●



"Sotheby's?"

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Farber and the Errant Nun

by Gordon Cotler

"Seventeen years on the job, this is a new one," Jimmy Buffalo announced to anyone in the room who might be interested. As it happened, all three of his fellow detectives were busy on the phone.

But also, as it happened, Bernie Farber, on a periodic tour of his West Side precincts, entered the squad room just in time to keep the remark from dying in the stale air. "What's a new one?" he asked.

"Hey, Lieutenant," Buffalo said by way of greeting, and then, "A woman who looks better dead than alive." He held out a couple of eight-by-ten head shots. "Am I wrong?"

A screenwriter for crime films such as 1979's *Sanctuary of Fear*, Gordon Cotler is also the author of several mystery novels published by St. Martin's Press. His most recent book, *Artist's Proof* (1997), is still in print. In recent years Mr. Cotler has spent much of his time writing short stories. Other cases in his delightful Farber NYPD series will appear in *EQMM* later this year.

The first picture was of a corpse, a police photo that showed an attractive young woman with full red lips, thick lashes, and eye shadow, and blush on her otherwise sallow dead skin. The other was of a mousy young thing in a bridal crown, cheek by jowl with her smiling groom. This woman was alive. She had thin lips, raisin eyes, and a generally unremarkable face. "And remember," Buffalo pointed out, "this is her wedding picture. She *primped* for it."

Farber looked at the pictures. "Are you sure it's the same woman?" And then, after a closer inspection, "Yeah."

"The husband says it is," said Buffalo. "But even he wasn't a hundred percent until he went over to the morgue with Tom Gluck and eyeballed the body. He'd brought the bridal shot in when he

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tried to file a missing-person report."

"When did she turn up?" Farber asked. This looked like a possible homicide and he was usually informed of homicides in any of his five precincts within hours of their being reported.

"Around ten this morning," Buffalo admitted. "I was about to call you. They'd have found her yesterday but it wasn't a pickup day."

"She was discovered by a sanitation crew?" Farber guessed.

"Off Riverside in the Nineties. You know the drill. On the day between collections the black trash bags pile up at the curb. The bride was in two near the bottom of a pile, one pulled down from her head, the other up from her feet."

"Was she dressed?"

"Fully clothed. With an emerald what they call 'pendant' around her neck, which she'd been strangled with. A nice piece."

"So we can rule out a grab-and-run mugging. Where's the husband now?"

"On his way back from the morgue with Gluck. So we can take a statement." Grudgingly, "Did you want to sit in?"

"Why? You don't need me," Farber said. His wife had cautioned him recently that he was too hands-on with his subordinates and he had a sense that this subordinate felt the same way.

An instant later he heard himself say, "But, hey, if it won't bother you and Gluck I'll hang by the door for a few minutes." Sternly he added, "Jimmy, only if it won't cramp your style."

Ten minutes later, Gluck and Buffalo were facing the somewhat glazed young widower across the table in the interrogation room. His name was Aaron Marston and he was in his late twenties with a hairline already in retreat and neat, regular features. Except for the nonstop drumming of his left heel against the floor, he didn't move a muscle.

The two detectives had been partners for so long their movements and voice patterns echoed each other, much like those of a long-married couple. They both opened their mouths but it was Buffalo who got the words out first. "When did you find your wife missing?" he asked.

"Night before last, when I got home from work." Marston's voice wasn't that of a New Yorker; Farber (at the door, as he promised) would bet on a prairie state. "It must have been about eleven-thirty. I came in to the precinct but the desk sergeant said I couldn't file a missing-person report until she'd been gone three days. He said people sometimes just cut out for a while. I said, not my wife, not Claire. He said to check the hospitals." Marston set his mouth in a grim line. "I did."

"What type of work keeps you out till eleven-thirty P.M.?" Buffalo asked. This well-barbered widower was no night watchman.

"I'm a lawyer." He was managing to keep a tight lid on his emo-

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tions. The drumming heel continued to be the only sign that he was under tension.

"Till nearly midnight?" Gluck asked.

"I'm a first-year associate at a Wall Street firm, Biggers Groot. They make me earn the privilege of working for them. I'm nailed to the floor till ten, eleven, twelve at night, two, three, four times a week. Running up the billable hours. That's all they care about, the damn billable hours." He flashed a dark look at Buffalo. "Does this have anything to do with finding whoever killed my wife?"

"I don't know that it does, but I don't know that it doesn't," Gluck said. "Let's find out. How did your wife keep busy in the evening while you cranked out billable hours? Did she frequent the movies? Visit friends?" He took a beat. "Maybe go out dancing?"

"Nothing like that. She was a homebody. She mostly read, worked around the apartment. We've been in New York less than six months. Back home we were living with her folks. No time ever to be alone. She loved having a place that was just hers and mine." He paused and his lip trembled. "You know something? I'm not sure I like your last question. Do you think she was . . . she was seeing another man?"

"Mr. Marston, we ask the questions," Buffalo said. "And yes, we do have a possible problem here. A problem with your wife's behavior." Farber tried to hand-signal the detectives to ease off; lawyers can get litigious when their feathers are ruffled. Buffalo studiously ignored the gesture and barreled ahead. "Let's face it, you hardly recognized your wife in the police photo. You want to tell me what that was all about?"

Marston's heel stopped drumming. He hooked that foot behind the other and pulled it tight against the ankle. For a moment he looked as though he might explode. Then he went the other way. His face softened. "You have to understand something," he said in the flat voice that held down his inner turmoil. "Claire was brought up in a fundamentalist religious sect back in Iowa. She didn't know how to dance till I taught her. There was no smoking in her world, no alcohol, church two or three times a week." He swallowed hard. "She was a virgin when we married. Yes, she left a lot behind when we moved here, but she still kept to how she was raised in the way she presented herself. In what she believed. She wore no more makeup than a touch of pale lipstick. At her office—she was a secretary, a very good secretary—they called her the nun. The nun, Detective."

"When she was found," Buffalo said, "she was wearing a bright red lipstick, more than a touch of it." Here he consulted his notes. "Plus—and I don't even know what some of these things are—I

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was given this list: eye shadow, eyeliner, mascara, blush, and lip liner." He let the obvious question hang in the air unasked.

Marston unhooked his feet and planted them firmly on the worn linoleum floor. "Why was she made up that way? Don't you think I've asked myself that question? Tormented myself with it? I've turned it over and over in my mind. And I can offer a possibility, an answer that's nothing remotely like what you must be thinking."

"Please."

"Claire and I came from different worlds. I'm pretty much an agnostic. We would never have met in a social setting; we were thrown together. I was working to save for law school, she was a secretary in the same office. We were acquaintances, then we were friends. Work, the great equalizer, right? Eventually I went off to law school and then I would see her when I came home on school breaks. She was someone I could talk to about the pressures. It wasn't until I finished my first year that I realized I loved her. Needed her." Again he swallowed hard. "She had a shining soul."

The painful memories were making it hard for him to speak. It seemed to take an act of will for him to go on. "There was something about her honesty—her 'what you see is what you get' attitude—that set her apart from other women I knew. Set her above them. I knew as surely as I had ever known anything in my life that she would be a rock I could lean on. But, as I said, we were from different worlds."

For the first time his rigid body moved. He placed open palms on the table and bent forward for emphasis. "Claire wanted, in whatever ways she could that were consistent with her core beliefs, to enter my world. To please me. The makeup—don't you see?—must have been an experiment. She must have thought wearing it would make me more comfortable when we went out—with other couples, whatever. As if I gave a damn. She was my Claire, she was beautiful. She probably painted herself up for an hour or two a couple of times when she knew I would be home late. So she would feel at home with the stuff before she tried it with me. She couldn't have made herself up often because even I could see, when I looked at her body at the medical examiner's, how badly she did it."

"So she just happened to run afoul of some stranger when she left the apartment wearing her new makeup." Buffalo's tone conveyed his doubts.

"Whether it was a stranger or somebody she knew I have no idea. But one thing I can tell you for certain because I know my Claire so well. Every fiber of her being. She didn't paint her face to attract another man."

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A uniformed officer had opened the door a crack and handed a note to Farber. "From the medical examiner," the cop whispered.

Farber glanced at the note, opened his mouth to say something, resisted the temptation to micromanage, and handed it to Buffalo.

Buffalo read the note and lifted his eyes slowly to Marston. "Mr. Marston, did you know your wife was two months pregnant?"

Marston's eyes opened wide, then he blinked rapidly. The single word was breathed rather than spoken. "No . . ."

Sylvie said, "It's an old story—the minister's daughter leaves home and goes wild. A revolt against her upbringing. Aren't you glad we raised our girls on a long leash?"

"You mean because they seem conventionally mainstream?" Farber replied. The Farbers were seated at their much abused kitchen table drinking after-dinner coffee and making serious inroads on a pecan coffee ring. "Claire Marston's parents probably thought their daughter was conventional, too," he continued. He often briefed his wife on his cases; she sometimes brought a fresh perspective to them. "Aren't parents often the last to know when a woman strays from the straight and narrow?"

"Thanks for putting my mind at ease about our girls," Sylvie said. "Actually, if there's a husband in the equation *he's* usually the last to know about a woman's hanky-panky."

Farber paused with a piece of coffeecake halfway to his mouth. "Oh?" he said.

"I don't mean you," Sylvie said hastily. "I'm thinking of your widower. Talk about denial, what can he possibly be thinking? The dead woman might as well have had a scarlet 'A' sewn on her simple black dress. By the way, the necklace she was strangled with? Was that a gift from the husband?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Because a woman going out to meet her lover tends to wear the jewels he gave her." She waited. "So?"

"You seem spookily knowledgeable on this subject," Farber murmured to his coffee cup. And then, to Sylvie, "Marston wasn't sure where the pendant came from. He thought it might be a piece that was in his wife's family."

"Uh-huh. Bernie, her kind of family doesn't wear that kind of jewelry. Hats off to the poor guy for trying to save his wife's honor."

"You're beating a dead horse. The boys and I are agreed that there must be a lover somewhere out there. That's not the question. The question is how do we find him."

"Yes, how do you?" Sylvie was suddenly respectful. "Do you have anything at all to go on?"

"Just that thanks to the demands of her husband's billing-hungry law firm, Mrs. Marston had three or four evenings a week

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when she was free to get in trouble. I don't doubt she left tracks. They always do. Twelve detectives are doing the legwork to find them." Avoiding Sylvie's eye he added, "If the boys need me, I'll lend a hand." And, reasonably confident, he claimed the last of the coffee ring.

"A secret lover? I don't see it." Mr. Pirosh, of Pirosh & Baker, shook his head emphatically. His boxy corner office had been furnished, probably by his father, at least forty years ago. He was about fifty, a big man, fleshy, with incipient jowls, and he was overflowing his trousers and smoking a cigar that exactly suited him. "Claire was a straight arrow. And how. Best secretary I ever had. It's a damn shame." Farber couldn't tell whether the man meant he regretted Claire Marston's death or only the loss of her secretarial services.

"How did she dress?"

"Like a mouse," was the instant response. "Some of these girls, the way they dress, do themselves, you'd think they were daring you to come on." The cigar came out to allow for a full-press leer. "And I might just take them up on the invite if these damn anti-harassment laws didn't scare the bejesus out of me." The cigar went back in. "With Claire it was just the opposite. It was like working with a nun. That's what the girls called her, the nun. I sometimes wished she'd slash on a fire-engine lipstick, hike up her skirt, maybe chase some of the gloom out of this place. But, hey, she was a hell of a secretary, and if I needed cheering up I could always stroll through the typing pool."

"So you'd describe Claire as plain?"

"She *did* herself plain. Flash her up a bit and she'd come off not half bad. Matter of fact, I once suggested to Elaine—the office manager—that she take Claire aside and give her a lesson or two on clothes and makeup. Elaine told me she might as well talk to the wall."

"Any idea what Claire did after work?"

"After work? I think she went home and waited for her husband, the lawyer."

"She didn't socialize with any of the men in the office?"

"The men liked her, if that's what you mean." The cigar came out again and he examined the lengthening ash. "They'll tell you that I took her to lunch on Secretary's Day and we were gone nearly three hours. I got ragged about that."

"Three hours? What did you talk about?"

"Me. My miserable life. My divorce situation. I'd rather be in a train wreck. That woman knew how to listen."

"Did she have visitors? Personal phone calls?"

"Her husband would call. Her parents out West, once. I think she told them to call her at home."

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"That's it?"

"I didn't monitor the woman. It was just if I passed her desk and overheard. And hey, who cared? She could get twenty personal calls a day, she'd still knock off more work than any girl ever worked for me."

"Has her desk been cleared?"

"Not yet. Help yourself." Suddenly mournful-looking, he sank into his desk chair.

Claire Marston's gunmetal desk sat in an alcove just outside her boss's door. It was as clean as a billiard table. She had left no unfinished business on its surface when she left work, nor any evidence of her personal life.

Farber opened and closed the side drawers. They yielded nothing of interest. In the center drawer he found an old-fashioned one-day-at-a-time desk calendar. This was where she jotted down her personal business—buy eggs and butter, pick up the dry cleaning. On the date three days before she was murdered was a circled notation, Axel Horvel Stockley, followed by an exclamation point. He flipped open her Manhattan directory. No such listing. And yet he knew that name from somewhere.

And then he remembered the small East Side hotel. He looked it up and dialed. "Hotel Stockley? Do you have an Axel Horvel registered?"

Horvel was a darkly handsome man in his thirties wearing a well-cut business suit. He had already phoned the front desk to prepare his bill when Farber called the Stockley, and he was settling it, his wheeled black suitcase at his side, when Farber entered the jewel-box lobby ten minutes later. Farber introduced himself and asked if he might have a few minutes in connection with a police investigation.

The man registered mild concern; his heavy eyebrows moved to join each other. "I have a flight out of La Guardia in two hours," he said. He was another Midwesterner.

"Plenty of time," Farber assured him.

He led them to a leather couch near the front door that sighed a protest when they settled on it. Farber wasted no time on amenities. "How do you know Claire Marston?"

"Claire was my secretary for nearly three years. In Des Moines." He became alarmed. "Has something happened to her?"

"It'll be on the evening news. She was found this morning, murdered."

Horvel reared back against the couch. "No! Good God, how awful. She was . . . She was a wonderful person. The genuine article." He put a hand to his face to steady himself. "What happened?"

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"She was strangled by person or persons unknown. You saw her recently?"

"A few nights ago. I'm in town on business and we met for a drink after work."

"A drink?" Farber's eyes narrowed.

"Sorry. I drank, Claire had tea."

"Did she seem troubled?"

"Now that you ask, a bit nervous maybe."

"You saw her often?"

"Three times in New York. Once each time I've come in. I don't know that many people here socially, and Claire was often available in the evening. Her husband worked late. I can't believe she's dead."

"Do you remember if she was wearing jewelry when you saw her?"

"I wouldn't notice that sort of thing, but I doubt it. When she worked for me I stupidly gave her a bracelet on her birthday. She never wore it."

"You did notice that."

Horvel's face colored and he said, "I guess I did."

Farber let it pass. He said, "The other night, did she tell you she was pregnant?"

"No! God, how awful. I know she wanted a family. She spoke about kids a lot when she worked for me."

"So you'd have expected her to tell you the good news."

"First thing. That's the first thing I'd have expected out of her mouth. Are you sure?"

"Yes." His cell phone rang and he fished it out. "Excuse me. . . . Yes, Jimmy." He took his notebook from a breast pocket and began writing.

The dermatologist's harried receptionist was handling the phones and managing the paperwork, but her number-one priority was to make sure no one left the crowded premises without settling the bill. "I'm sorry, Officer," she finally said. "You should have made an appointment. What exactly is your problem?"

Farber had no wish to unsettle the waiting patients behind him who were flipping through dog-eared magazines. Quietly, he said, "I prefer to tell that to the doctor."

The young woman's face registered an immediate diagnosis of genital herpes. "Sir, I can make an appointment for you on Thursday," she snapped. "Today we are fully booked."

No kidding. This place looked like an airline terminal the day of the big storm. Either dermatology was a hot specialty or Dr. Frayn was a hot dermatologist. Maybe both. There were three examining rooms behind the reception desk and two nurses were kept busy

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ushering patients in and out of them. The doctor, a pale youngish man with delicate features and wavy blond hair, was not much more than a white-coated blur as he slipped from one room to the next.

Still speaking softly, Farber said, "Miss, unless one of these waiting patients is *in extremis,* tell Dr. Frayn that Lieutenant Bernard Farber, *Homicide,* needs him *now.*"

That did the trick. "Yes, sir," she said.

He was put in examining room two, where he failed to fend off a nurse who thrust a paper gown at him and ordered him to change into it unless his problem was situated on his head or arms. She vanished before Farber could set her straight.

Just as he was beginning to regret that he had taken this part of the investigation from Buffalo and Gluck, Dr. Frayn slipped into the room, soft-voiced and reassuring. "How may I help you?" he murmured. A hundred patients might be waiting out front, his sole interest at the moment was this paunchy man with a paper gown under his arm. He settled into a chair as though he had all day. His pale eyes leaked concern, his bedside manner was king-sized. If Farber had acne he would make for this man like a shot.

He said, "I'm not a patient, Doctor. I'm a police officer, Lieutenant Farber, investigating a homicide. You might be able to help."

Nobody had briefed the doctor. He sat up straight and his mouth dropped open. "Help? Help how?" he asked. No longer the comforting father figure, he seemed at a loss for a proper posture.

Command of the situation had shifted to Farber. He put the paper gown on a shelf. "You have a patient named Claire Marston," he said and watched for a reaction.

"I do?" Dr. Frayn replied. And then, more composed, "I'm not a primary-care physician, Lieutenant. I have a great many patients. I know only a fraction of them by name."

"You might remember this one."

Dr. Frayn searched Farber's face for some further explanation, then opened the door a crack. "Helen," he called, "please bring me the record of—" he turned to Farber—"Claire . . . ?"

"Marston."

"Claire Marston." He closed the door and danced his fingers on the arms of his chair. "Are you looking for an opinion on a forensic question? I did once testify in a trial. . . ." He trailed off in a half-question.

"Why don't we wait for the patient's record?" Farber said.

It was handed in by the nurse a moment later, a single sheet in a file folder. Dr. Frayn glanced at it and then looked at Farber. Farber said, "Does that refresh your recollection?"

Dr. Frayn said, "I see that this woman made one visit, a couple

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of months ago. With a rash on her left forearm. I prescribed an antibiotic lotion. As a matter of fact, I gave her a sample that I believed would be sufficient to clear up the minor problem. Apparently it did, as she never returned."

"And you've never seen her since?"

"Not that I can recall. Her problem was not interesting enough to make a lasting impression."

"How about the woman herself? Maybe she made an impression." Farber opened the Manila envelope he was carrying and removed the eight-by-ten bridal picture of Claire Marston. "Does this refresh your recollection?"

Dr. Frayn studied the picture. "I can't say that it does." His soft gray eyes looked pleadingly at Farber. "Would you please tell me what this is about?"

"I was just about to do that. Is your home phone number—" Farber was consulting his notebook—"914-555-4387?"

"That's right, I live in Westchester. Tarrytown, to be precise." The doctor was looking more and more troubled.

"According to the phone company, calls were made from Mrs. Marston's home phone to yours."

Instantly, "To my home? That's some kind of mistake. A misdial. A wrong number."

"Six calls over three weeks? All in evening hours."

"It's some kind of mistake. She must have a friend with a similar number."

"No similar number was dialed. It's true that the calls were all brief. The longest was two minutes." He took his time. "Maybe to stay on longer would have been awkward."

The doctor's pale face was suffused with color. "See here, I know what you're implying. Look, I'm a married man. I have a child. I don't make dates with patients."

"Or anybody?"

"That's none of your business. Who is this woman?"

"It's 'Who *was* this woman?' She was murdered day before yesterday. If I were you, I'd talk to your lawyer."

"That's got to be our man," Jimmy Buffalo said. He was pleased with himself for having thought to check the Marstons' phone records.

"If he is, you've still got a long way to go to make a case," Farber said. He, Buffalo, and Gluck had gathered in the detectives' squad room late in the day. "Ten minutes' worth of phone calls do not add up to a relationship. Who knows, maybe Claire's rash was itching. If she and the doctor rendezvoused, where was it? You'll have to *shlep* their pictures all over town looking for someone who can put

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them together. Until you make that match, you've got nothing to show an ADA."

"How about the pendant?" Gluck said. "That should help."

"It might," Farber said. Gluck had traced the emerald pendant to a 47th Street jeweler who dealt in antique pieces. The man, an ancient Hassidic Jew with fading eyes and memory, was unable to describe the buyer except to say that he was a man, he had paid eleven hundred dollars cash for the piece a few weeks ago and, oh yes, he had asked if he could return it if the lady didn't like it. The jeweler had said yes, within thirty days.

"So they had a conversation," Farber had observed. "Might he recognize the buyer's voice?"

"What do you think? I had to speak directly into his 'good' ear to get through. The doctor knew where to shop."

So that's how things stood after a day's loss of shoe leather by Buffalo, Gluck, and a platoon of detectives. They had checked out the other tenants in the Marstons' brownstone and the neighbors had confirmed Marston's assessment of his wife's pristine character. Tomorrow the team would start nosing discreetly into Dr. Frayn's life. They were bound to turn up something. But right now it was getting late and wives were holding dinner. It was time to adjourn.

Then Buffalo remembered one more item he thought Farber might want to see. Marston had given him a computer printout from his office of his billable hours. He hoped it might be of some use to the investigation, since it showed how often he had worked late and how late he had worked.

Farber took the stack of paper. "Why so many pages?" he said.

"Marston may be a first-year associate but his firm bills clients two hundred and fifty dollars an hour for his services. Broken down into fifteen-minute increments."

Farber shook his head in wonder. He said, "My mother warned me I was going into the wrong line of work."

Sylvie was in bed asleep when he arrived home at nearly midnight. An open book, facedown across her midsection, suggested that she had tried to wait up for him. She hadn't even taken off her reading glasses. He removed those gently and placed them on her night table and turned off her reading light. He was grateful that she wasn't awake; she would have asked a lot of questions it was too soon to answer.

Ten minutes later he was drifting off to sleep himself. His last thought was to thank himself for doing everything by the book. Axel Horvel's phone number in Des Moines was inscribed in his notes.

In the morning, while he pretended to be asleep with his head

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buried in the pillow, he could hear Sylvie as she bustled about getting ready for work. She had to make a 7:35 train to Westchester and occasionally she was out the door before Farber was out of bed. Now he could sense her frustration as she rattled coat hangers. When he knew she absolutely had to leave or she would miss her train he faked a wake-up stretch and roused himself from the bed to pad after her out of the room. He gave her a sleepy goodbye kiss at the front door.

She said, "Bemie, did you manage to get some dinner?" And then, more to the point, "For heaven's sake, what's happening in your garbage-bag murder?"

He said, "The boys are on it. I'll be checking with them later today." His face was the picture of innocence. "Didn't you tell me not to be so hands-on?"

Her look said, *I know exactly what you're doing.* But she said only, "Goodbye, Bernie," turned crisply, and was out the door.

"When I got home I had a piece of cheese," he called after her.

Farber arrived home before his wife that evening. Partly in celebration of the day's developments and partly out of guilt for having teased Sylvie this morning, he had stopped at Zabar's and picked up a few ounces of smoked sturgeon and a couple of bagels. By the time she opened the front door he had the goodies laid out on the kitchen table and he had filled a pitcher with ice in preparation for making a couple of his famous dry martinis.

Sylvie took one look at the festive board and said, "You've made an arrest."

"Not yet. But imminently. Imminently."

"Tell me," she said. She slipped off her coat and draped it over a chair back rather than take the time to hang it in the closet. "No, let me guess. Claire Marston's lover killed her when she told him he was the father of her child. The beast didn't want to hear that. Did you track him down through the emerald pendant?"

"Very good, Sylvie. In part. It was the pendant that set me thinking." He was mixing the martinis and he stopped talking. His practiced hand was measuring out enough vermouth to mellow the gin but not so much as to give the mix a winy taste. He stirred briskly and poured the drinks. Not until he had handed Sylvie hers and taken an approving sip of his did he feel free to continue. Not a moment too soon. She was ready to throttle him.

"The man who bought the pendant," Farber said, "asked the jeweler if it could be returned. Does a woman say 'I don't like it' to a gift from a lover? More likely the husband was thinking ahead to recouping his eleven-hundred-dollar investment once Claire was dead. I checked a printout of the husband's hours of work against

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a series of phone calls from his home to a doctor Claire had seen. Was she arranging assignations with him?"

"Was she?" Sylvie wanted to know. She hadn't touched her drink.

"Highly unlikely. The calls were made not on nights when the husband was working late but on nights when he was home."

Sylvie took a moment. "You mean *he* made them? The wife would have been home, too. Could he take that chance?"

"Why not? The calls were brief. He could have made them when she was out of the room, posing as a telemarketer or a charity pitchman. Or even when she was in the room, if he said, 'Sorry, wrong number' and then dialed another."

Sylvie's mind had already leaped ahead. "But the heavy makeup—"

"Part of Marston's overall plan. A nice try at misdirection. Persuade us of Another Man out there and we might not focus on the usual prime suspect in a domestic murder, the spouse. He must have coaxed Claire to try the makeup and then strangled her with the pendant he'd bought. Or—a grisly thought—he could have applied the makeup himself after he'd killed her."

Sylvie paled and took a deep gulp of her martini. "My God," she whispered, and then, "I'm resisting that scenario. I'm a romantic, Bernie. I'm resisting the husband as the murderer. All you have for sure is the timing of the phone calls. Pretty thin stuff. Everything else is sheer speculation."

"So far. But we've subpoenaed Marston's bank records. He'll have some explaining to do if he drew out enough money recently to pay for the pendant."

Sylvie's mouth was set in a grim line. "He'd need a powerful motive to hatch a plot that ugly."

"True. Like not wanting to be married to Claire, not wanting a baby."

"Then why did he marry her in the first place?"

"My very question. I called her old boss in Des Moines this afternoon. He told me Marston went to law school on Claire's inheritance from her grandmother. That explains the marriage. He never intended it to last. Claire's pregnancy spoiled his chance for a graceful exit into a brilliant career. She would never have agreed to an abortion."

"Can he really be that cold-blooded?"

"He's a corporate lawyer."

"I'm not big on capital punishment. In this case I would make an exception."

"No. If he's guilty the right punishment for Marston is life without parole. Fifty years—eighteen thousand days—without a single billable hour. A lawyer's ultimate nightmare." ●

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The Wonders of Technology

by Kate Ellis

Anthony stood at the window and watched as a bird of prey hovered like a child's kite in the cloudless blue sky. The bird hung there with its great wings outstretched, then it plunged down into a field, bringing the life of some small, unsuspecting creature to a swift and bloody end.

This was nature, the eternal cycle of life and death where the strong preyed upon the weak. Anthony had observed nature many times from the tiny window of his isolated stone cottage set in the midst of the rolling North Yorkshire countryside. He was no stranger to death.

Kate Ellis studied drama and worked in teaching, marketing, and accountancy before first enjoying writing success as a winner of the Northwest Playwrights competition in the U.K. She has since authored six crime novels and numerous short stories. Her American publisher, St. Martin's Press, released her fourth novel, *The Funeral Boat*, in July of 2002. *A Painted Doom*, her most recent work, is, as yet, available only in Britain. †

He looked across at the desk in the corner of the room, at the computer screen. It was telling him that the system had now shut down and would he please—Anthony liked the "please," a touch of politeness in a rude, mechanical world—switch the machine off carefully. He pressed the button that sent the machine to sleep with a beep and an electronic sigh, and patted it like a much-loved pet. The computer was his lifeline to the outside world, his livelihood. And without the computer he would never have encountered Stephanie . . . or the others.

The clock ticking slowly on the otherwise bare mantelpiece told him that it was almost time. Today was the day he had arranged to meet Stephanie and he didn't want to be late. He had plans for

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Stephanie . . . such plans.

He had never met her but he already felt he knew her so well. The printouts of her e-mails were kept in the letter tray on the white desk by the window, neatly sorted into date order. Her photograph—relayed electronically into Anthony's living room—stood in a neat black frame on the desk; a touch designed to put her at her ease.

He had put the pictures of the others in that frame, too. He had met them all through the Internet: They had all been lonely; and they had all been looking for something Anthony couldn't give them. But they were gone now. And today was Stephanie's day.

He was to meet her at York railway station at eleven-thirty. He had already showered and dressed, so now all he had to do was to make sure that all was well in the cottage's clinical steel kitchen. He wanted everything to go smoothly this time. He checked the knives to make sure that they were razor sharp, just as he liked them; that they would slice through meat as if they were cutting through butter.

The kitchen inspected, he returned to the living room and looked around. It was a small room in a small cottage and Anthony's head almost skimmed the low doorways and the protruding beams. A typical Yorkshire cottage, his mother had called it: She had said that all it needed was chintz curtains and roses round the door. But such things were hardly to Anthony's taste, so he had installed plain white blinds at the windows and had replaced the greenery in the small front garden with gravel—more clean and modern in a technological age.

The clock ticked away insistently, reminding him that time was passing swiftly in his cocooned, electronically-controlled life. He picked up the newspaper that was lying on the black leather armchair and shoved it out of sight under the cushion. It was part of his ritual every time he brought them back to the cottage. Everything had to be in its proper place.

He looked at Stephanie's photo. Today he would see her in flesh and bone. She had been a flat, two-dimensional image on a computer screen, but soon he would touch her hair, feel the warmth of her skin, and know that the blood was coursing through her veins. Today she would be a real woman. And she would be there alone with him.

Anthony took his keys from their appointed place next to Stephanie's picture and left the cottage, locking the door carefully behind him. There was such a lot of expensive computer equipment to tempt the determined thief, and you couldn't be too careful, even in the countryside where sheep outnumbered people.

The gravel crunched beneath his feet as he walked to the brand-new Range Rover that stood in front of the cottage. He was glad

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that he had no neighbours to hear his footsteps on the gravel: Neighbours were people, and the less people intruded on his silent world the better. And there were some things it was better that neighbours didn't overhear.

As he drove to the station, he considered the course of this strange, modern courtship. The reply to his advertisement on the Internet; the first tentative e-mails; the mutual checking of facts, just to make sure that they were both who they said they were; the e-mails growing more intimate, then more passionate . . . although he hadn't hinted at his special tastes as that might have frightened her off. He had gone through the same procedure with the others, of course . . . but they had disappointed him and now they were gone, all trace of them destroyed, wiped from the computer.

Would Stephanie be different? Anthony asked himself as he drove down the familiar country lanes. Or would she be like the others? Would he have to wipe away all trace of her as if she had never existed?

He reached the outskirts of the city with its huddles of brand-new houses, soulless as rows of computer screens; he passed modern factories, supermarkets, and cinema complexes—the sprawling urban detritus that fringes any town and city, however attractive. Then, as he drove on towards the city centre through older suburban streets, he began to think about Stephanie's last e-mail. "I hope that we are what each other is looking for," she had said. Not the most elegant of prose, perhaps, but the words held a promise. Would she be nervous about meeting him in person, he wondered? Anthony wasn't nervous. Excited, yes—but not nervous. He was never nervous when he met them.

Anthony's mind had been wandering as the traffic lights ahead of him changed to red and he had to pull up sharply. He was nearing the busy heart of York now with its narrow winding streets and historic buildings, and he could see the great golden Minster rising above its earthly neighbours, its towers reaching up towards heaven. He glanced to his left and saw a hastily scrawled sign outside a newsagent's shop.

"Police seek man for North Yorkshire cyberspace murders. New clues in hunt for e-mail killer."

Anthony put the car into gear and sped off as soon as the lights changed to green. The clock on the dashboard told him that he had fifteen minutes: fifteen minutes to find a parking space and make his way to the station to meet Stephanie. Then back to the cottage. Then . . . His palms were sweating as he gripped the steering wheel but he tried to concentrate on his driving.

He passed under one of the ancient gates set in the medieval city walls and drove through the bustling streets towards the sta-

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tion. There were people everywhere, all sizes, all ages; people chattering; people stepping off pavements; people smelling of sweat or perfume; people eating; people kissing; people getting in Anthony's way.

How much more controllable, clean, and hygienic was cyberspace: You could switch people off if they didn't live up to your expectations or if they displayed inconvenient emotions. He sounded his car horn at a young mother who was crossing the road in front of him with a screaming toddler in tow and she answered with a two-fingered salute. Anthony's foot hovered over the accelerator for a few seconds but then he applied the brake gently. It would be foolish to draw attention to himself.

At last he reached his destination and steered the car past the row of waiting black taxis into the station car park. This was it. There was no turning back now.

He recognised Stephanie almost at once. She was standing beneath the station clock as arranged, a tall young woman dressed in baggy jeans and a high-necked fleecy top. Anthony felt a stab of irritation that she hadn't made the effort to look smarter for him—more feminine; more sexy. He compared the reality to her e-mailed photograph and concluded that she had probably made generous use of the airbrushing facilities . . . as Anthony had himself. Even though her shoulder-length hair was blond and wavy, she was no beauty. But somehow that didn't matter . . . not now.

Anthony stood behind a pillar and watched her for a while, feeling like a hunter stalking an unsuspecting deer. From the dozens of e-mails they had exchanged he knew her views on everything from ecology to capital punishment to love. He knew her taste in music and food. He knew her and yet he didn't know her. He knew what she wanted him to know and she knew only what he had allowed her to know. She couldn't know of his tastes, of his plans.

He decided that there was no point in waiting any longer: It was time to begin.

Stephanie was looking for him, scanning the faces around the station concourse, so Anthony was denied any element of surprise. She caught his eye when he was several yards away and smiled shyly, uncertainly.

"Anthony?" she said as he drew nearer. Her voice was husky and breathless and Anthony felt a thrill of arousal. "You're just like your picture."

"So are you, only better-looking," he added to put her at her ease. He wanted her to be at ease, compliant. But he had lied: Her skin wasn't as flawless as her picture had suggested . . . and her features were coarser. And it wasn't the first lie he had told her. What fibs, harmless and otherwise, were told in cyberspace?

She allowed Anthony to lead her out to the car and she made no

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protest when he suggested lunch at the cottage—in fact, she said she liked the idea of a quiet meal for two. He felt relieved that she was making things so easy for him.

As Anthony steered the car down Station Road and crossed the bridge over the River Ouse neither of them spoke. The electronic messages that had passed between them for weeks had been fluent, witty, passionate, intimate. But here, in the flesh, they felt almost like strangers . . . but not strangers. Anthony had had this problem before, with the others: He wasn't quite sure what level of intimacy to assume.

When they had left the crowded confines of the city walls and reached York's residential suburbs, Stephanie broke the awkward silence. "How many girls have you met like this?" she asked.

Anthony's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He stared ahead, unblinking. "A few. Why?"

"No reason. Just curious."

"What about you? Er, have you ever done this sort of thing before?"

"A few times."

"I assume you didn't find everlasting bliss with any of them or you wouldn't be here."

Stephanie didn't answer but she examined the short, neat nails on her long, slender hands.

"Tell me their names," she said quietly.

"Whose names?"

"The other girls you met through the Internet."

"Why?"

"I'm curious."

They had left the outer suburbs behind at last and were now in the open countryside, driving down a winding A-road past gently rolling fields of cattle and sheep. Anthony put his foot down.

"Can you slow down a bit?" Stephanie said, suddenly nervous.

Anthony eased his foot off the pedal. "Were you scared of meeting me?"

He could almost hear Stephanie's brain working; weighing up her answer before she spoke.

"Scared? Why should I be scared?" She sounded confident but her voice cracked with nerves.

"It's just that when you've only communicated by e-mail and you get to know someone so intimately just by the written word, meeting that person in the flesh can be . . ."

"You're right," she said, sounding a little more relaxed. "You can't use your senses like you can when you meet someone face-to-face. I know you . . . and yet I don't know you."

Anthony allowed himself a smile.

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"Are we nearly there?" Stephanie asked after a few seconds of silence.

"You sound like a child going on holiday . . . 'Are we nearly there yet?' "

Stephanie didn't laugh. The weak joke at her expense had been a mistake.

"The cottage is about a mile away. Pretty isolated. You said that you liked the countryside?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I do. And North Yorkshire's such a lovely part of the world."

"You said you knew it well but you didn't say how."

"Childhood holidays," said Stephanie quickly. "My parents always loved it round here."

"You've not mentioned your family in your e-mails."

"They're all dead. There's only me now."

Anthony didn't know whether to make conventional noises of sympathy. But he said nothing. Why pretend?

He turned the vehicle down the rough lane that led to the cottage. "Nearly there," he said smugly. "I'm going to cook you steak. You said in your last e-mail that it was your favourite."

"So I did," said Stephanie with an enigmatic smile.

"I like mine with the blood still dripping."

He took his eyes off the track for a moment to look at Stephanie, watching for her reaction. But she just sat, staring ahead. He hoped she wouldn't be difficult. The others had been far more compliant at this stage, all smiles and short skirts, anxious to impress.

The car came to a halt outside the cottage, its tires crunching dramatically on the gravel. "This is it. Chez moi. This is where I work and play."

Stephanie climbed out of the Range Rover and stood staring at the cottage in silence. When Anthony opened the front door she followed him into the low-beamed living room with its white walls and black furniture: high-tech and low-fuss.

"What would you like to drink?"

"Mineral water. I want to keep a clear head."

This wasn't what Anthony had hoped for. He usually added a little something to their drinks to make them more relaxed and mineral water would hardly disguise the taste. He'd have to think of something quickly.

"What do you want to keep a clear head for? We should be celebrating. Come on, live a little."

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?"

"Something like that."

"I'll stick to the mineral water, thanks," said Stephanie firmly.

"Suit yourself." Perhaps his chance would come later . . . over lunch.

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He poured the drinks and sat down beside her on the shiny black leather settee. As he edged closer, she edged away.

"You didn't tell me their names," she said unexpectedly.

"Whose names?"

"The other girls you met. What were their names?"

Anthony took a drink from the glass of red wine he'd poured for himself. "Why are you so interested?"

"I'd like to know. After all," she said softly, "it's part of your past . . . your life, and I want to know everything about you. Not just what you've told me over the Internet . . . everything. Who were they? What were their names?"

This wasn't going well, he thought. Stephanie appeared to be the possessive type and this would have ruled out any lasting relationship even if that had been what he was looking for . . . which it wasn't. But he decided to give her what she wanted. She wasn't going to be around very long anyway.

"Well, there was Sally . . . and then after Sally there was Jennifer . . ."

"Jennifer who?"

"You want their surnames?" This woman was bordering on the obsessive. The sooner he got it over with the better. "Jennifer Cranson. Why?"

Stephanie stood up. It seemed to Anthony that she had lost interest in that particular game. She crossed the room to his computer and switched it on. It awoke into life with a sleepy bleep.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd check your e-mails for you. I sent you one before I left home."

"Don't bother. I'll do it later. It's time I started on the lunch." Eating would occupy her for a while. He could delete her latest e-mail when it was all over.

She was walking around the room, restless, examining things, picking objects off the stainless-steel shelves. She flicked the switch on Anthony's expensive hi-fi system. It was tuned to the local radio station. The midday news.

"The police say they have a new clue in the hunt for the so-called cyberspace killer who sends e-mails to the police telling them where to find his victims' bodies. A spokesman for North Yorkshire police told our reporter that a man was seen leaving the location where the last body was found and they now have an e-fit picture of the suspect. He is described as being . . ."

Anthony darted over and switched the radio off. "We don't want to hear that, do we?"

"I did," said Stephanie, flicking the switch on again. But the news had moved on to a story about a factory closure with a hundred job losses. The man being interviewed was blaming comput-

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erisation. She shrugged her shoulders and sat down in an armchair near the fireplace.

Anthony watched her, wishing that she had made herself more attractive for him, wishing that her baggy clothes gave more of a clue to the figure beneath. "I'll get the lunch on," he said. "I've made a salad already. I've just got to cook the steaks. How do you like yours?"

"Medium."

Stephanie sipped her mineral water as Anthony wandered into the kitchen. He felt slightly uneasy. At this stage they usually followed him, taking an interest in what he was doing. He took the knife, razor sharp, and trimmed the fat off the bleeding steaks that lay waiting on the chopping board. He slid them onto the griddle and as they started to sizzle, Stephanie appeared in the doorway.

He swung round. The knife was in his hand, sharp and dripping with blood.

"Why don't you put that thing down?" said Stephanie, walking towards him, her eyes fixed on his.

He put the knife down on the worktop where it left a red-brown stain.

"Tell me about Jennifer Cranson."

Anthony stared at her for a few seconds. "Why?"

"What was she like? What happened between you?"

He searched his memory for a picture of Jennifer Cranson, but he could hardly recall her face. She was just one of a long procession of girls he'd contacted through the Internet and brought back to the cottage: a nondescript, mousy girl—inexperienced; frightened. It hadn't taken long to get rid of her. "I can't remember much about her. Let's forget her, eh? Let's talk about you," he said, thinking of the small bedroom and the other things upstairs . . . waiting.

"Jennifer's dead," Stephanie said bluntly, almost revelling in the brutality of her revelation.

Anthony took a step backwards, staring at the knife. "You knew her?"

"Oh, I knew her. She was the vulnerable type, never easy with men. Then one day she took it into her head to try and meet someone through the Internet. She was lonely. She was looking for . . . well, love, I suppose; or friendship at the very least, but all she found was men who used her . . . and abused her. She died six months ago."

Anthony stared at her. He'd have to finish this . . . get rid of her as soon as possible. "Died?" he heard himself saying.

"She killed herself," Stephanie said quietly. "She left a note. And a list of names. Yours was on it."

"I don't know what you mean." He looked into Stephanie's cool

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blue eyes and felt a sudden surge of anger.

He took a step forward and it was over in a second. The steel flash of the knife; the blade tearing through flesh and muscle; the startled, strangled cry as the victim crumpled to the floor.

Anthony looked up, his hand clutched to his stomach. His attacker was watching him: Stephanie . . . but not Stephanie. She was holding her luxuriant blond hair in her hand. It was a man who looked down on him, a slightly built man with fine fair hair who, in the wig, had passed easily for a woman.

"Why?" Anthony managed to gasp the word even though his strength was ebbing away with his blood.

The voice when it answered was deeper, stronger. "Jennifer Cranson was my sister."

Anthony closed his eyes. He was weaker now but he was just aware of the creature that had been Stephanie stuffing its wig into a carrier bag. Now it stood before him, a young man, watching him die.

He had lost consciousness by the time Stephen Cranson had deleted all "Stephanie's" e-mails, taken the picture of "Stephanie" out of its frame, wiped away all trace of his fingerprints, and typed his final message to the police on Anthony's computer. They would find the body soon, just as they had found the others. He hadn't liked to think of his victims' bodies lying there for weeks and being found decomposing by some unsuspecting neighbour or postman. The e-mail would have reached the police by now and they would arrive at the cottage soon. He grabbed the keys to the Range Rover: He would drive off; head for York, and dump the car. The plan had worked before.

He turned the key in the ignition. A calm getaway, not exceeding the speed limit. By the time the police realised that the car was missing, he would be long gone.

But nothing happened. He turned the key again. Again nothing. Stephen's heart was beating faster now but he knew he must stay calm. The car had been immobilised. He searched for a switch, first systematically, then frantically.

The distant sirens were gradually getting louder, coming closer. He knelt down, thrusting his hands beneath the dashboard, feeling for switches and wires. The police were on their way and he had to get out; get away from Anthony's dead, bleeding body.

When the car door opened, Stephen Cranson saw a large policeman looking down at him.

"We got your e-mail," the constable said with a smile of triumph. "And if you're trying to start this thing, you're out of luck. It's got an immobiliser . . . all computerised. Wonderful things, computers," he added as an afterthought.

The cyberspace killer put his head in his hands and wept. ●

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The Hand of God

by Edward D. Hoch

Father David Noone, parish priest-cum-detective, debuted in 1964 but only starred in a couple of cases before the author relegated him to the sidelines for nearly four decades. Mr. Hoch tells us that he was encouraged to write another Noone story for this issue by the good reader reaction to Noone's return to action in "One More Circus" in the May 2002 *EQMM*.

When the bishop took the trouble to phone Father Noone personally at Holy Trinity rectory it usually meant there was a problem. Sometimes it was only a parishioner disturbed by the previous Sunday's sermon, or news of a visiting missionary who wished to appeal for funds at the Sunday Masses.

Bishop Xavier never gave his name when he called, but for David Noone there was no mistaking his jovial, outgoing manner. David had known him as a monsignor in another diocese, the cardinal's troubleshooter, until he was elevated to his present position the previous year. "How's the repentance rate at Holy Trinity this morning, Father?"

"Holding our own, Bishop."

"Glad to hear it. I know you have a busy schedule but might you be able to go out to the college Friday morning and fill in for me at this conference they're having?" "The college" always meant St. Joan of Arc, the area's only Catholic institution of higher learning. It had started out as a women's college in the 1950s, but by the '80s it had joined the trend toward admitting male undergraduates as well. About fifteen years ago the clergy had handed over its administration to lay people, though it remained a Catholic institution.

"Which conference is that, Bishop?"

"The Church in the Twenty-first Century. It's just the morning session, from ten to noon. The professors are all laymen these days and I felt we should have a clerical presence. I was going myself but something else came up."

"I'm no match for theologians."

"You've got a good head on your shoulders. That's all you need. It's only two hours and they'll do most of the talking anyway."

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So it was that Father David Noone drove out to the graceful suburban campus on a cloudy Friday morning in early May. He was barely into high school when St. Joan of Arc opened its doors back in the early fifties, and remembered his disappointment when he learned it was to be a girls' college. As it turned out, by the time he finished high school he'd decided to enter the seminary, so it hardly mattered.

The college buildings sat at the top of a low hill, reached by a gently curving road flanked by lines of juniper trees. There was a traditional quadrangle at the center of the campus, with some of the buildings connected by tunnels beneath it. As he reached the top of the hill he was surprised to see two police cars and a van from the medical examiner's office. He parked and got out as a short young woman came hurrying over from the gathering crowd of spectators. "Are you Father Noone?"

"That's me. What's been happening here?"

She held out her hand. "I'm Rachel Stowe, administrative assistant from the theology department. They sent me to meet you. We've had an unfortunate accident. One of our female students has been found dead."

"I could administer the last rites," David offered.

"Our chaplain has already done that."

"Father Ritz? Is he here?"

"Over with the detectives." She was a slender, attractive woman in her early thirties, wearing glasses with dark frames that seemed to match her swept-back brown hair. Under different circumstances he guessed she would have a ready smile and a joke, but just then her face was as somber as the leaden sky.

"What happened to your student?" he asked.

"They think she was shot. I just wanted to tell you that your ten o'clock session has been canceled because of it."

"Shot," he repeated. "You mean murdered?"

"It's too soon to tell. They're still searching for a weapon."

He thanked her and made his way across the parking lot, stepping around police vehicles until one officer tried to stop him. "Sorry, Father. This is a crime scene."

"Would you tell Father Ritz I'm here?"

But Jerry Ritz, the blond, blue-eyed chaplain who looked young enough to be a student himself, reacted to his name and recognized David at once. He hurried over to greet him. "I heard you were replacing the bishop at this morning's session. Good to see you again, David."

"I guess that's off now. What happened here?"

"A sophomore named Darcy Clemence. A security guard found her body behind those bushes just after dawn. It appears she'd been shot in the back of the head."

"Had she been molested or robbed?"

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"She was wearing jeans and a school sweatshirt. They didn't appear to be disturbed. Girls don't carry purses around campus. She had a few dollars stuffed in the pocket of her jeans."

"She was killed sometime before dawn?"

"Looks like it. They haven't found anyone who heard the shot."

David thought about it. "Shooting someone in the back of the head doesn't fit with an attempted assault or robbery."

"Unless she was trying to run away," Father Ritz suggested.

"Yes, there's that, too."

The young woman from Theology had reappeared at David's side. "Pardon me, Father, but the other speakers from our department thought they might meet with you briefly, so long as you're here. They're trying to reschedule the event."

"Certainly. Lead the way, Miss Stowe. Or is it Mrs.?"

She gave a hint of a smile. "It's still Miss, but you can call me Rachel. We're quite informal in Theology."

"I'll see you later," he told Father Ritz, and fell into step with Rachel Stowe. "I know Professor Bentley," he told her. "How many others are in your department?"

"There are five professors including Dean Bentley. He's the head of the department, but he wasn't scheduled for your session. You'll be meeting Professors Marlowe, Yang, Godfrey, and Kappawitz."

"That's a large department."

"They teach only one or two courses each. The dean and I are the only full-time people."

"I would think the theology department would be a bit dull for a young woman," he said as they walked toward Becket Hall.

"Not at all! The professors are a lively bunch, and Dean Bentley is like God. But I do keep busy with campus activities. I handle props for the drama club and conduct an exercise class for faculty wives twice a week. It keeps me fit as well as them."

The theology department occupied a portion of the top floor in Becket Hall. Rachel Stowe's desk was located in a large square cubicle with low sides, allowing her to greet anyone entering the department. They had come in through a door in one wall of the room, and the professors' individual offices were arranged in a row along the back wall. All the doors were open at the moment, but the four men were grouped in the office at the far right.

Rachel ushered David in and introduced them. "Professors, this is Father David Noone. Matt Kappawitz, Jack Yang, Mark Marlowe, and Luke Godfrey."

David shook their hands and couldn't help commenting, "The four evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John."

"It's not the first time we've heard that," Jack Yang said with a bit of a smile. He was slender and boyish, certainly part Chinese.

"Nor the last," Mark Marlowe agreed. "We're used to it by now.

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We're the four evangelists and Dean Bentley is God. Anyway, pleased to meet you, Father." He was a bulky ex-football player type, gruff but likable.

"Same here. I'm sorry our event had to be postponed. Did any of you know the young woman who was killed?"

"What's her name?" Luke Godfrey asked.

It was Rachel who answered. "Darcy Clemence, a sophomore. Father Ritz knows her, and I think she's in our basic theology class."

"A sophomore, you say?" Godfrey frowned, perhaps trying to place the name.

The fourth man, Kappawitz, bald and wearing small half-glasses, nodded. "She's in my class. Smart student."

"Was she assaulted?" Yang asked.

"They don't know yet," Rachel answered. "She seemed to be fully dressed."

They were in Matt Kappawitz's office and he walked over to the window. It presented a clear view of the area where the body had been found. "They're removing her now. There's quite a crowd around." David and the others joined him and saw the tall body being placed on a stretcher and covered with a sheet.

Kappawitz suddenly had a thought. "I wonder if Dean Bentley knows what's happened."

"He's not usually in this early on Fridays. He has no classes till afternoon," Rachel reminded them.

"But his car is in its parking place against the wall," Yang pointed out. "See it down there?"

Luke Godfrey grunted. He was the tallest of the four men and the only one with a beard. David thought he could easily have passed for one of the original evangelists. "I'll go and try his office door."

"I'll come with you," David said. "We met at a banquet and I should say hello if he's there. When I come back we can talk about rescheduling the symposium."

He had to walk fast to keep up with the long-legged Godfrey. The frosted glass door at the end of the hall read simply: *Dean Bentley,* and when Professor Godfrey tried the door it was unlocked. He knocked as he pushed it open. "Dean Bentley?"

The blinds were down and the office was lit by a desk lamp. David Noone recognized Bentley's snow-white head at once, lying on the desktop as if in slumber. But the trickle of blood from his left temple left no doubt of the truth. A snub-nosed .38-caliber revolver was still clutched in his left hand.

"My God!" Luke Godfrey exclaimed, hurrying to the desk.

David had just an instant to shout a warning. "Don't touch anything! Get the others and send someone downstairs for the police. I'll stay here."

"Did he shoot himself?"

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"Perhaps. Go for help."

Though the body was already cold, Father Noone prayed for a moment, giving conditional absolution, and was making the sign of the cross when the others arrived.

"Is he dead?" Rachel asked.

"Yes. Did somebody go for the police?"

"Mark did."

Matt Kappawitz moved a step closer to the body. "I can't believe he'd kill himself."

David peered at the dead man's blank computer screen. He tapped the space bar and after a moment the screen came to life. The message on it read: *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to kill her. She hurt my fingers. I'm sorry.*

A few minutes later a detective named Spears followed Mark Marlowe into the office. Father Ritz was right behind them. "Did you administer the last rites?" the chaplain asked David.

"Yes. But he's been dead quite awhile."

"Has anyone notified his wife?" the chaplain asked.

"She's visiting their son in London," Jack Yang volunteered.

The detective stared at the glowing screen. "A suicide note on a computer. That's a first for me."

David Noone looked at the others. "I assume Dean Bentley was left-handed?"

It seemed to dawn on them for the first time that he'd been shot in the left temple and the weapon was in his left hand. "No!" Luke Godfrey insisted, and the others chimed in. Dean Bentley had been decidedly right-handed and apparently everyone knew it.

Detective Spears frowned. "That puts a different aspect on things." He dropped to his knees to examine the dead man's right hand, which was resting on the desk. David joined him, watching as the detective carefully lifted the pale right hand. "Look at those two fingers. They've been crushed. They're broken. No wonder he couldn't use his right hand to kill himself."

Godfrey came to peer over their shoulders. "How could that have happened?"

David was wondering the same thing himself. His eyes scanned the office, taking in the filing cabinets and overloaded bookcases. He spotted a pair of black bookends on top, miniature reproductions of Rodin's "The Thinker," holding up the Harvard edition of *The Works of William James.* The one on the right was at an odd angle, almost in danger of falling off the tall top shelf. He reached up and lifted it off, surprised at how heavy it was. "Look here," he said to the detective. The felt base of the bookend seemed to bear the imprint of two fingers. "This could have been used to crush them."

Detective Spears grunted. "I wish you hadn't touched that, Father."

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"I didn't realize it might be connected with his death. I was only trying to keep it from falling."

The detective produced a large plastic evidence bag and covered the bookend. "We'll need your fingerprints for comparison."

"Certainly," David agreed, feeling a bit like a scolded child.

"Why would he do that to himself?" Jack Yang wondered.

"Maybe she did it," Mark Marlowe said. "That's what he put in his note."

"I'll have to ask you all to leave," Spears told them. "This is a crime scene. Please wait in your offices until I come to talk with you."

They followed his instructions, but rather than wait in their offices the four professors gathered around Rachel Stowe's cubicle. Marlowe took out his pipe and lit it. "This is going to get the college some bad local press, however it turns out," he said.

"Do you think he killed himself?" Rachel asked, tidying up her desk. It seemed obvious to everyone that this Friday would not be a typical workday for the theology department.

Marlowe took a puff on his pipe before he responded. "Well, it still could be suicide. The injury to his right hand would explain why he used his left. It wouldn't be hard to do with a small gun. I saw what his note said on the computer screen, that she'd injured his hand. All this took place during the night or early morning. Suppose he got that girl up to his office on some pretext and tried to molest her. She grabbed the bookend, smashed his fingers, and ran. Blind with fury, he went after her with the gun and shot her dead as she ran into the woods outside."

"Difficult to do in the dark," David pointed out.

"It may have been getting light. Even if it wasn't, the parking lot is lit all night as a security measure. He had enough light to see her. Then, overcome with grief at his actions, he returned to his desk, typed that message on his computer, and shot himself with his uninjured hand."

Detective Spears had entered the office in time to hear this. He asked to speak to each of them individually, beginning with David and Luke Godfrey, because they were the ones who'd found Dean Bentley's body. The first thing the detective asked David was what he thought of Marlowe's theory.

David smiled slightly. "I think we both know it couldn't have happened that way."

Detective Spears promised to call David Noone as soon as he had the lab results. David had just finished officiating at a Saturday morning wedding when Spears was on the phone. "Just checking in, Father. In case you were wondering, both of them were killed with the same gun, and the powder burns on Dean Bentley's head are consistent with suicide."

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"It was the bullet that killed him?"

"No doubt about it."

"And the hand?" The hand of God, he'd almost said.

"It doesn't make sense, what we talked about yesterday."

"Does the medical examiner agree with us?"

"Absolutely," Spears said. "The fingers were broken by that bookend, yet the hand was pale. There was no blood and no bruising, and no blood on the bookend, either. The injury was caused after death, but not immediately after death. The blood had to drain from the hand into the lower extremities."

"What about the gun? Is there any record of the serial number?"

"We traced it to an out-of-state pawn shop. Those places sometimes sell weapons at gun shows without checking on the buyer. Anyone could have purchased it."

"Even Bentley himself?"

"Even Bentley himself," Spears agreed. "He often worked late on campus and there's been some petty crime in the area."

"Has his wife been notified?"

"Yes. She's flying back tonight with their son. She's shocked by the whole thing, can't imagine him killing himself."

"Neither can I, at this point," David said. "The supposed suicide note said she hurt his fingers. If that wasn't done until after death, then Dean Bentley couldn't have written the note."

"I questioned the dead girl's roommate yesterday afternoon, but she couldn't tell me much, just that Darcy had been out all night. I guess that's not too unusual on campuses these days."

"What did the autopsy show about sexual activity?"

"Nothing recent, and only a minimum of alcohol in her blood. Maybe one drink."

"I'd like to speak with the roommate. What's her name?"

"Linda Bonesteel." He gave David her dorm number.

There were no Saturday afternoon classes at Joan of Arc, and the dead girl's roommate was not at her dorm. Dressed in his black pants and a sport shirt, David prowled around the campus without success. It took him nearly an hour to locate someone who knew the young woman and could point her out in one of the library carrels where she was typing a paper. He introduced himself and asked if they could talk.

Linda Bonesteel eyed him suspiciously. She wore jeans and a sweatshirt, without makeup, and wasn't particularly attractive at that moment. "I'm not a Catholic, Father. If you've come to give me some sort of grief counseling—"

"No, no. I just want to ask you about Darcy."

"I've already talked to the police."

"If you could just give me five minutes of your time . . ."

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"Go ahead," she said with a sigh.

"Were you and Darcy friendly?"

A shrug. "She was my roommate. I've had worse."

"Was she often out overnight?"

"Sometimes on weekends. Not usually on a Thursday night."

"A boyfriend? Did she talk to you about anyone?"

The roommate shook her head. "I think he was . . ."

"What? Please tell me. It might help us find her killer."

"She let something slip once about having a crush on one of her professors. But I don't know if it ever amounted to more than that. We weren't close enough for me to ask her about it."

"If she wasn't with him Thursday night, where might she have been?"

"Maybe drinking at the Balboa Lounge. I didn't tell the detective that because she wasn't twenty-one. I didn't want to get the bartender in trouble."

David's next stop was the Balboa Lounge. It was across the street from the campus, a popular student hangout. Even on a Saturday afternoon there were a few guys already drinking at the bar, watching an NBA playoff game. One of the bartenders knew Darcy Clemence, and he remembered seeing her Thursday night, though he hadn't waited on her.

"What was she drinking?"

"Probably Coke. She wasn't twenty-one."

"Did you see her leave?"

"Maybe, a little before closing time."

"Was she with anyone?"

He screwed up his face, trying to remember. "Older guy, bald, with those little glasses. I didn't know him."

David thanked him and left.

He found Matt Kappawitz at his bachelor apartment near the campus. "Well, Father Noone! This is an unexpected pleasure on a Saturday afternoon. Come in!"

He picked up the remote and turned off the baseball game he'd been watching. "Could I get you a beer?"

David smiled. "Just one. That's my limit." He waited until the professor brought him a glass and a cold bottle from the refrigerator. Then he said, "I wanted to talk about the killings, about who might have had a motive for them. So far as I know, you're the only person who knew both victims well."

"Come now! Are you saying I'm a suspect?"

"Not at all. I'm a parish priest, not a detective. But you did know them both. You told me Darcy was in your class."

"That's right, but most of the department probably knew her as a student. She'd come to my office a couple of times."

David poured his beer slowly into the glass. "Did you happen to

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see her Thursday night, before she was killed?"

"I don't believe so. I'm not in the habit of fraternizing with my students."

"She was at the Balboa Lounge, Professor. She left shortly before closing with a man who fits your description."

He started to protest the accusation, then thought better of it. "I saw her there, yes. She was my student and I was trying to be friendly."

"Did you buy her a drink?"

"She wasn't twenty-one. I gave her a few sips of my beer."

"And you left with her."

"We left at the same time. I walked her partway to her dorm and then left her."

"Why didn't you walk her all the way?"

"To avoid the sort of questions you're asking."

David took a sip of beer. "Just where did you leave her?"

"Near the library."

"Show me where that is in relation to her dorm."

Kappawitz got a pen and notebook and made a rough diagram of the central campus. "I left her here," he said, tapping his pen on the front of the rectangle representing the library.

David took the pen and drew a line from the library to Darcy's dorm. "What's this building?"

Professor Kappawitz moistened his lips. "Becket Hall, near where her body was found."

"What time did you leave her?"

"It must have been shortly after two."

"Did she ever say anything about Dean Bentley?"

"Not really. We kidded about imagining him as God. It was just a joke."

"If she saw a light in his office, might she have gone up there?"

"Certainly not! None of us would have. Actually, when he works late he always closes the blinds anyway. The light barely shows through."

"Could she have been romantically involved with Bentley?"

"I can't imagine that," he replied, though there was a trace of uncertainty in his voice.

"Why the hesitation?"

"Jack Yang mentioned once that he thought Bentley cheated on his wife. I don't like gossip and I didn't pursue the conversation."

"I'm wondering about his hand. The fingers were crushed after he was dead, but not immediately after. They could have been crushed by someone other than the killer. The office was unlocked."

Matt Kappawitz frowned. "Why would anyone do that?"

David Noone held up his right hand. "The thumb and forefinger are essential for a priest because he holds the host during the con-

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secration. If some people viewed Dean Bentley as God, crushing his fingers might have been viewed as destroying his power."

The professor shook his head. "Only a madman would do that. If you'll excuse me, Father, I'd like to get back to watching the game."

"Thanks for your help," David said. He let himself out while Kappawitz turned on the television.

David walked back across the campus, taking in the sights. Graduation was only weeks away and the bulletin board in the student union was crowded with the usual notices seeking summer jobs or rides home. The drama club was performing Sidney Kingsley's *Detective Story,* which reminded David that once again he was trapped in a detective story himself.

Father Ritz was coming out of the cafeteria. "Are you helping with the funeral arrangements?" he asked the chaplain.

"Not really. The young woman's body is being sent home to Pennsylvania. And we're waiting for Mrs. Bentley's return from England to arrange his funeral."

"I'm looking for Professor Yang."

Father Ritz thought about that. "I believe he tutors a young man on Saturday afternoons. You might try his office."

"Thanks. I will."

"Stop by my place later and we can talk."

He found Yang alone in his office on the top floor of Becket Hall. "Come in, Father," he said. "I've just finished a tutoring session. Some of these young people need all the help we can give them."

"Theology is not the easiest of subjects," David told him.

"Agreed. Can I help you with anything today?"

"I'm just nosing around, trying to help Detective Spears a bit. I don't have any business here, really, and I'm not after gossip. But Professor Kappawitz recalls that you once suggested Dean Bentley might be cheating on his wife."

Jack Yang shifted the pencils on his desk nervously. "I don't like to speak ill of the dead. A couple of months ago I came back to my office late one evening and thought I heard a woman's voice in Bentley's office. There were—how should I say it?—passionate sounds from within."

"Could it have been Darcy Clemence?"

"I have no reason to think so. There are six hundred other women enrolled here. For all I know it could have been his wife."

"But that's not too likely."

"No," he agreed. "This had more of a clandestine feel to it."

"But if Mrs. Bentley found out about it she might have had a motive for killing him."

"She's in England, due back tonight," Yang reminded him.

He had one more question he wanted to ask, regarding their feel-

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ings toward Dean Bentley, but felt it unwise to ask Yang. As he was leaving the building he spotted Rachel Stowe and Professor Marlowe just entering. "You people working on a Saturday?" he asked.

"We have to start cleaning out the dean's office," Marlowe explained. "I asked Rachel to help me sort out his personal things now that the police have finished with it."

"I wonder if I might speak to Rachel for a moment," David said.

"Certainly. I'll be up in his office, Rachel," he said, and headed for the elevator.

"What can I help you with?" she asked David.

"I didn't want to ask you in front of Marlowe. How were relations between Dean Bentley and the professors? Did any of them want his job?"

She gave a quiet chuckle. "All of them. Does that answer your question? They may have called him God but they certainly didn't worship him. Every one of them thought they could do a better job running the theology department."

"Did any of them feel strongly enough to kill him?"

"Theologians don't kill people, Father. You should know that."

Campus life seemed more subdued than usual that Saturday afternoon, no doubt because of the double tragedy. David sought out the chaplain's office as Jerry Ritz had suggested. "Want to relax and go to the play tonight?" Jerry suggested. "I've got a couple of tickets."

"Is it any good?"

"I hear the kids do a great job with it."

David phoned the rectory to make certain the senior priest in residence there was handling the five o'clock Mass. Then they had a light supper on campus and walked over to the auditorium where the drama club production was being performed. *Detective Story* was not a mystery but a powerful if somewhat dated story about detectives, set entirely in the squad room of a New York precinct station. There was little or no violence until someone grabbed a detective's gun for the final shooting that brings the play to its climax.

The student cast received a standing ovation at the end. On their way out David thanked Father Ritz for bringing him. "I thought you'd enjoy it," the chaplain said.

"I more than enjoyed it. Now I know who killed Darcy Clemence and Dean Bentley."

It was nearly midnight when Detective Spears joined them in the chaplain's office. "What's this all about?" he asked David. "Couldn't it wait till morning?"

"I've telephoned the killer and arranged for a meeting in the

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theology department. I'm going there now. I want you and Father Jerry to be standing by."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Spears said. "I'd have a tough time explaining another killing out here."

"I'll go in by the door, in case our friend is watching. Jerry tells me you two can take the tunnel under the quadrangle so you won't be seen."

David crossed the campus to Becket Hall and entered the building. It was unlocked and he could see that a light was already on in one of the theology offices. As he got off the elevator, Professor Godfrey came out to see who was there. "Father Noone! What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

"I'm meeting someone."

"Odd time for a meeting."

"Judging by Dean Bentley's activity, the place was pretty busy at night."

Godfrey smiled slightly. "Who've you been talking to?"

"The word gets around. It's gossip, I know, but it can become important when it involves two murders."

"Is that what this is about?"

David sat down at Rachel Stowe's desk. "You see, we were led to believe that Darcy Clemence died first, apparently at Dean Bentley's hand, but nothing could be further from the truth. It seemed that the right-handed Bentley had shot himself in the left temple, and he'd been forced to use his left hand because two fingers of his right hand had been broken by a blow from a heavy bookend. It looked good, except that enough time had elapsed between the killing and the maiming that the blood had drained from his hand and there was no bruising or bleeding. That told me the suicide note on the computer was faked, because Bentley couldn't have mentioned a hand injury that occurred after his death. But why go to all that trouble? Why didn't the killer shoot him in the right temple to begin with? There is only one possible explanation. Both were killed with the same gun, but Bentley must have been slain before the killer had any intention of committing a second murder. I think Darcy Clemence died because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, passing Becket Hall late at night just as the killer was leaving the building. As a theology student she was known to the killer, and she would surely remember this encounter when Bentley's body was found."

"So he took out the gun again and shot her in the back of the head?"

"Something like that," David agreed. "Then a near-perfect plan presented itself. Rolling the body into the underbrush, the killer returned to Bentley's office, shot him a second time at close range to leave the necessary powder burns, and placed the gun in his left hand. Knowing he was right-handed, the killer lifted that heavy

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bookend off the top of the bookcase, crushed his fingers with it, returned the bookend to its place, and wrote that message on the computer. It might have worked, except for the absence of blood and bruising."

Luke Godfrey was staring at him. "You're telling me all this because you think I did it."

The elevator bell dinged in the hallway. "Not at all, Professor. In fact I think this will be our murderer arriving now."

The door opened and Rachel Stowe walked in.

"What is this?" she asked. "Are you hearing his confession, Father?"

"Hardly. But I'll hear yours if you'd like. I was just explaining to Professor Godfrey how you killed Dean Bentley and Miss Clemence."

"That's insane!"

"Is it? Sit down and I'll run over it again for you."

When he'd finished, it was Luke Godfrey who raised an objection. "I missed it the first time you explained it to me, Father, but not this time. If the killer fired a second shot into the dean's head to create powder burns, there'd have been two bullets. I'm sure the medical examiner would have discovered it in his autopsy."

"That was bothering me, too," David Noone admitted, "until I went to see the drama club's production of *Detective Story* tonight. When the shots rang out at the end of the play I had the answer. The second shot, fired by the killer to leave the powder burns, had to have been a blank cartridge."

"Where would the killer have found a blank cartridge in the middle of the night?"

David hadn't taken his eyes off Rachel's face. "Do you want to answer that?" he asked.

"I . . ."

"You told me earlier that you handled props for the drama club, and you must have had a key to their storage room. Before returning to Dean Bentley's body you detoured to the auditorium where you knew you could find a .38-caliber blank cartridge to fit your gun. You also knew the gun couldn't be traced to you."

"I won't hear any more of this," she announced, turning toward the door, but David kept on talking.

"What happened, Rachel? Did he promise to leave his wife when she returned from London, and then change his mind? You're shorter than the others. You must have had trouble reaching that heavy bookend on top of the bookcase. And trouble putting it back. That was why it was barely on the edge of the shelf."

She was out the door, where Spears and Father Ritz were waiting. She collapsed crying into the chaplain's arms, and those arms circled her, whether in capture or comfort David could not tell. ●

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Art by Jason Eckhardt

SILENT END

by Nancy Springer

"Phew, what's that?" Unlocking the front door of her very own beloved shop, Judith smelled something that made her think her ex-husband had played one of his nasty tricks. Had broken in and left her a rotting dead rat, perhaps. Stepping inside, she glanced at crisp white bisque arranged on shiny black shelving; except for the stink, all seemed well. Out of habit, she flipped the ceramic door sign that declared "Personal Pottery is OPEN!" before she headed past the plastic-covered studio tables into the back room to hang up her jacket—

"Oh my God!"

She froze by the coatrack, gawking at shards of glazed bisque piled around the kiln like cyanotic casualties of war: shattered butterfly plaques, smashed fish platters, beheaded bunnies and puppies and kittens, pony figurines in pieces, decorator plates and miniature teapots and fallen knickknacks of all kinds strewn amid the insectlike, multi-legged stilts that had supported them—an entire kiln load of crafts lay in dismembered ruins on the linoleum. The expensive ceramic shelves that went in the kiln had been

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thrown aside, lying in monolithic, fissured slabs, crushing the bluish bodies. It was, in miniature, like the aftermath of a terrorist strike. Judith screamed, backed away, and stumbled to the phone.

By the time the cop cruiser pulled up, she had recovered from her shock and segued into anger. "I want you to get the detectives in here," she told the township police officer walking toward her as she propped the shop's front door open to air out the place. "I've had enough of this." Though actually, It had never sabotaged her shop before, just stalked her, slashed her tires, left venomous messages, that sort of thing.

A two-time Edgar winner for her books for young readers, Nancy Springer is capable of writing some very sophisticated adult mysteries, too. Last year she was nominated for an Agatha Award for the biting short story "Juggernaut" (*EQMM* 6/01). She joins us now with a pun-filled but diabolical cozy. If you have YA readers in your household, look for Ms. Springer's new YA fantasy novel *Lionclaw* (Philomel Books). †

"'Had enough of this'?" the cop echoed.

"It's my ex. Because I got a restraining order. I know it's him."

The cop gave her a long, almost bovine look. Without inflection he asked, "What's the problem? The smell?"

"No. Well, I mean, I hadn't thought . . ." Judith straightened her spine, annoyed by her own failure to connect the devastation in her back room with the stench until this moment. That lapse showed how unnerved she was, and she hated to be less than poised.

Crisp as bisque, she said, "Maybe there's some rotting garbage involved. I don't know. This way." She led him to the inner doorway.

"Everything I loaded into the kiln Sunday night," she told him as he took in the carnage. "A week's worth of business. Several hundred dollars I'm going to have to refund. God knows how many ticked-off customers."

"That stuff used to be, uh, merchandise belonging to you?"

"It was already sold. Glazed, paid for. And overglazed. All I had to do was fire it." Watching the cop, she saw his placid face rumple; like many people, he didn't understand what her business was about. Effortlessly, Judith shifted gears into her spiel. "Personal Pottery is unique to this area, a shop where you can creatively color your own ceramics. Select your inexpensive bisque item, and for a nominal studio fee we supply the brushes, the glazes, studio space, everything you need to paint your own one-of-a-kind

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ceramic artwork. When your—"

Starting to get it, the cop pointed at the kiln. "That's an oven for pottery?"

"A kiln, yes." Quite a good kiln, actually. An expensive kiln. A Cadillac among kilns. A brick-and-metal cylinder a yard wide and four feet high, automated, computerized, and complete with adjustable ceramic shelving, large enough to hold dozens of fancy-handle coffee mugs and ruffle-edged pie plates and teddy-bear tissue covers and personalized piggy banks, Judith's kiln was the white-hot heart of her paint-your-own-pottery business.

"That broken stuff, was it baked yet?"

"No." It lay with the greeny-blue overglaze still on it. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, somebody pulled it out of the kiln and smashed it—"

"What's in the oven, then?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"I don't like that smell," the cop said. "How hot does that thing get?"

"Twenty-three hundred degrees Fahrenheit. But I keep it at eighteen hundred. Why?"

"Smells like a crematory in here. How hot is that thing right now?"

"Room temp." The computer display flashed the blood-red numerals 72.

Keeping his eyes on the kiln as if it might pull a gun on him, the cop fumbled in a black leather pouch on his belt. He pulled out rubber gloves. He put them on. He took a few cautious steps forward, reached over, and inserted his fingertips under the kiln's heavy lid. He heaved it up.

"Stay where you are," he told Judith too late. She had followed, and she saw what he did. Ashes—yuck, a coating of reeking, greasy ashes in her kiln—and in the ashes a small blob of something that maybe used to be white, and some quarter-sized puddles with a metallic luster to them. And wallowing in one puddle, an oval, greenly glinting gem. And that was all, except some pallid stubs of—of bone?

Judith caught just a single shocked glance before the police officer lowered the lid. "Get back," he ordered.

"It could be something else," Judith blurted, starting to shake. "A—a big dog . . ."

"Only if the big dog wore jewelry. Get back."

At the end of the day, Judith was still in shock, so much so that she almost didn't go to Scrabble Club. She had told the police officer she wanted detectives? Hoo boy, she got detectives. The coroner said yes, those were human bones, and Personal Pottery became a

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crime scene, closed to business—yet more income lost—and all day it had been questions, questions, questions, like Chinese water torture. The signs of forcible entry on the back door—when had she first noticed them? Never. Why? Because I always use the front door. There's no parking in back, just a driveway for deliveries. (Idiots!) The smell, when had she first noticed that? Today. Tuesday. Not yesterday? No, the shop is closed on Monday. Because I fire the kiln on Sunday nights. Heat up and cool down takes twenty-four hours, makes the place awfully hot, you know? (Cretins!) But the pottery broken on the floor was never fired? Right. (Which means he did it Sunday night, shortly after I left. Finally, they're starting to get it!) So, ma'am, Sunday night you left here at nine P.M.? And what were your movements at that time? I went home! Did you see anyone, talk with anyone? No! Anyone who can verify your whereabouts? No, dammit.

Babbling to herself in her car after the detectives finally let her go, Judith declared, "They think I did it! They really think I did it! Morons!" And she was still shaking, because obviously It had put the body in her kiln for some reason, and aside from making her life a living hell, what was It trying to tell her? That she would be next?

She went to Scrabble Club because she didn't want to face the empty house alone. Even joining a group of pedantic misfits in a church basement seemed preferable. Why were all such Sunday School rooms bile green, with those heinous Masonite tables and mustard-colored bulletin boards and the selfsame melanic upright piano with a plastic Jesus on top? As she walked in, an egg-shaped, balding man greeted her, "Hi, Judy."

"Judith," she corrected him more frostily than was necessary. Poor Dick, he couldn't help it that he was a hopeless nerd. Judith just enjoyed cruciverbalization, herself, but some of these people were total word freaks, obsessed with cryptograms, anagrams, acrostics, puns, palindromes, whatever. Utter word geeks. At least Dick had said hi, unlike the club's other nerdy and obsessed male, Doug, who had achieved the Master level in regional Scrabble competition and was now going for national and Expert. Right this minute, while women members stood chatting all around him, Doug sat at one of the tables gazing in his usual baby-blue manner at a list of words he was memorizing—not the meanings, just the spellings. Nobody in the club knew or used Scrabble words in any context other than Scrabble.

"Yataghan," Doug whispered to himself, his brow creased beneath blunt, childish bangs. "Y-a-t-a-g-h-a-n."

Standing right beside Doug, Judith knew he was not speaking to her and did not wish to be spoken to. She addressed Dick instead. "Sorry I snapped at you. I've had a terrible day. Had to call the police. Somebody—"

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"Did you see the trophies from Saturday?" Beaming, Dick pointed toward a gleaming, aspiring display.

There had been a tournament, evidently. Who cared. "Somebody put a body—"

"I'm not in Novice anymore." Dick's smile echoed the lines of his triple chin as several women turned to congratulate him. "Yes, I got Master."

"That's great," Judith mumbled. "I suppose Doug won overall?"

"No, Eloise won!"

Judith almost offered Doug her sympathies. Three times so far she had found herself facing Eloise across Eloise's gold-filigree-and-mother-of-pearl custom-made Scrabble board, and each time she had managed to hold her own—or so she had thought until Eloise, at the end of each game, had used her seven remaining letters ("Bingo!" Fifty extra points.) and gone out. Which was brilliant if done once, almost impossible if done the way Eloise did it—habitually. Each time, caught flat-footed, Judith had realized that Eloise had been playing clawed cat to her mouse—and had looked up to see Eloise watching her get it. ("Aw, Judy want a crying towel?") Even playing Doug was not as bad as playing Eloise. Doug never cut even the most novice opponent a break, and he always won, but he didn't gloat. Actually, he didn't speak at all, usually.

"Sforzato," Doug whispered, tuning out various conversations. "S-f-o-r-z-a-t-o."

"Um, good for her," Judith told Dick. "I guess. Uh, like I was saying, somebody—" But Dick headed away, still nattering about his trophy. Judith turned to one of the women, a retired librarian named Phyllis, and started over. "You know my shop, Personal Pottery?" Dumb question. Judith talked up her business wherever she went. Everybody here knew all about it. "The most horrible thing has happened. Somebody, probably my ex-husband, burned a dead body in my kiln, and the police—"

"Kill," said an unexpected voice in quite a peremptory tone. Judith looked down to find Doug staring up from under his forelock, his vague, pallid eyes actually focused on her. "Kill," he repeated. "It's pronounced 'kill.' The 'n' is silent."

"Whatever." Judith just wanted to talk about what had happened. She needed to talk the way she had needed to recite It's infidelities and It's emotional cruelties after It had left her. She babbled at Phyllis, "A woman, it had to be a woman, the ashes, I mean, because there was a lot of gold in there, and a diamond, and how many men wear that kind of jewelry? Besides, the coroner thinks the bones probably belonged to a woman. Girlfriend, maybe. It had to be—"

But Dick was calling the club to order. Judith sat opposite Phyllis and played, but quite badly. She kept forgetting to tap the timer,

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she kept forgetting to mark down letters used so she would know what her opponent was holding during the end game; she even forgot to keep score. Instead, she kept talking, while Phyllis and several eavesdroppers listened with varying degrees of incredulity, discomfort, and fascination. Eventually, stopping the timer, Phyllis asked, "You really think the police suspect you of murder?"

"Yes! They're treating it as a homicide. They told me not to leave town."

"But they don't know who the victim is?"

"How could they? There's not even teeth left."

"But you think your ex-husband did it just to implicate you?"

"I wouldn't put it beyond him!" Though honestly, Judith thought, she had never believed It could murder anyone—other than herself. The bastard, if he had gone and murdered some other woman, it was infidelity all over again. Judith bleated, "If it wasn't him, then who? Who else would want to break in and cremate somebody in my kiln?" Seeing Doug glance at her from a neighboring table, she added lamely, "Or kill, whatever."

Phyllis murmured, "I think it's correct either way." Starting the timer, she said, "Your turn." But presumably she was not speaking of Scrabble when she added, "Poor thing, what are you going to do?"

Judith had no idea. She attempted "cadaver," misspelled it, missed a turn, and lost. During the evening she lost all three of her games, the third one to Dick, whose post-trophy gratification only increased when he scored above 400.

"Eloise beat me 478 to 290 on Saturday," he said. "I wonder where she is? She said she would be here."

Judith didn't care where the hell Eloise was. These people gave her the creeps. Without even saying goodnight she went home.

"We've been over this a thousand times," Judith complained to the detective the next day. She hadn't slept well at all, she was not yet allowed to reopen her shop for business, she was losing money, Personal Pottery was headlined in the morning paper as a murder scene, life stunk. "I told you who did it."

Seated across from her at one of Personal Pottery's tables, the detective sighed through his large nose. He was an aging man with elephantine earlobes and a snout to match. Judith wondered whether any other body parts had grown as he got older. Probably not. Probably the opposite. She got the feeling he did not like women as he said, "You think your former husband did it."

"He's mean enough. He put a Calvin-pissing-on-an-X sticker on the window of his pickup."

The detective didn't even blink, just went on woodenly. "And you claim that the broken merchandise was removed before the kiln started to heat on Sunday evening—"

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"No claim about it. Simple fact." It would mean third-degree burns to open the kiln after its first hour of heating.

"What if he had a welder's mask and gloves?"

"Maybe . . . No. The overglaze is still blue. Those things had barely begun to fire."

The detective accepted this with a snort of his potato nose. "Well, ma'am, if the break-in was Sunday night, you can forget the idea that your ex did it. He was at work. Thirty-five miles away from here."

Judith took this in slowly, with a chill, as bisque figurines looked on white-eyed from the shelves all around her. "Are you sure?"

"Twenty coworkers say he was there."

"But who else . . . I mean, it's so weird. . . ." If somebody really needed to get rid of a corpse, there had to be a thousand ways. Why break into her shop? If they really wanted to burn it, every factory in the county had an incinerator; why use the kiln?

In a cold, bored tone the detective asked, "You still think time of death was Sunday night?"

"Yes! I mean, no, I don't know when she was killed, if she was dead when he put her in there—" Dear God, please let that poor woman have been dead, or at least unconscious.

"But the perpetrator must have come in Sunday evening, knowing that the crime would not be discovered until Tuesday morning."

"Right."

"So it must have been someone familiar with your routine."

"Not necessarily." He wasn't going to pin it on her, dammit. "Anyone could look at the store hours. And I advertise delivery on Tuesdays."

"You seem to have a lot of answers, ma'am. Maybe you can explain this." Reaching into a pocket of his suit jacket, the detective pulled out a zip-locked, labeled plastic bag containing a white blob of something.

"What's that?"

"You tell me. It was found along with the ashes in your kiln."

He pronounced it with the final n. "Kill," Judith said just to put him down. "The 'n' is silent." She peered at the white blob with black spots in it. "Is that plastic?"

"Yes."

"But—how can it be? Plastic would have vaporized."

"Exactly. But it's only melted. It appears to be one of a pair of dice. Do you have any idea how it got in there?"

"No!"

"Would you agree that it must have been put in afterward?"

"Um, yes. Monday night, probably. Once the kiln gets down to a *hundred and thirty degrees, you can open it*—"

"Is that what you did, Judy? Opened it and put this in? Part of

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your game, maybe?"

"It's Judith," she said icily, "and I will not answer any further questions without a lawyer."

"But he must be absolutely obsessed," she bleated to Phyllis the next Tuesday at Scrabble Club. Judith herself felt obsessed; all week she had been missing sleep, missing meals, unable to think of anything except: Why? Why me, why my kiln? And who? Who was the victim? Who was the murderer, if not It?

Phyllis prompted, "Obsessed?"

"Yes, or insane." Judith herself felt half insane, what with the articles in the newspaper, the cops suspecting her, everybody talking about her; she felt the plastic Jesus on top of the piano watching her. The Scrabble timer flashed its red warning light like a police cruiser's beacon. She covered it with her hand, telling Phyllis earnestly, "He must have come back later to throw a die in the kiln. But why?"

"Something to do with the victim? Have they identified her?"

"No. How can they? All that's left is bits of bone and a jewel stone and that stupid die. Why would he throw a die in my kiln? Kill, I mean."

Die. Kill.

The words hung in the air. Staring at Phyllis, Judith breathed, "Oh my God."

"What?"

Judith whispered, "Nothing." She darted a panicked glance around her. Dick and Doug sat two tables away in utter silence, heads bowed, intent on an epic Scrabble contest. Other players, less serious, chatted over their games. But Judith did not see the member she was looking for. The one who gloated. The one who showed off. The one who always wore lots of jewelry, including, Judith seemed to remember, a large oval aquamarine. She hissed at Phyllis, "Where's Eloise?"

"Huh." Phyllis glanced around, mildly curious. "I don't see her. You'd think she would have been here last week, too, bragging about her trophy."

Without even excusing herself, Judith staggered up and ran to look for a phone. The church office was locked, but way down a dark hallway by the boiler room she found a pay phone on the wall.

"Yeah?" a barking voice answered her at the township police station.

Yes, the big-nosed detective was there, as she expected. The paper had said the police were working around the clock on this one, and even though the guy was a potato-faced misogynist, Judith could not wait to talk with him, help him out, get herself off the hook.

Standing in the darkest corner of the church basement, she told

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him eagerly, "I think I know who the victim was. A woman named Eloise Hamilton."

But instead of asking her why she thought this, the detective said in a chilly drawl, "Well, isn't that interesting. That's what we think, too."

"But—but how did you find out?" Too late, Judith realized how bad that sounded.

"Traced the stone. Jewelers keep records, you know." The detective's voice turned frostier yet. "How did you know Eloise Hamilton?"

His tone made Judith grab at the wall-mounted phone for support, yet she found herself babbling, "I'm—I was—in Scrabble Club with her."

"Is that right? I understand she was quite an obnoxious person."

"Yes, she was." Shut up, Judith told herself, almost crying, yet she kept going. She had to make this stupid cop get a clue. Had to. "Look, whoever killed her was a word freak. 'Kill,' that's why he put her in my kiln, because of the pun, don't you see? And 'die,' that thing he put in with her was a die. He couldn't stand it that she—"

A heavy hand clamped over her mouth from behind, choking her off. Another hand wrested the phone receiver away from her and hung it up. Judith struggled, clawed at the fingers bruising her face, tried to bite, tried to scream, but already she knew she was dead. He was very strong. Unexpectedly strong, for such a nerd.

"Good thing we had you under surveillance," the elephant-eared, potato-nosed detective said.

In the hospital emergency room, being treated for bruises and shock, Judith found it difficult to reply politely, so she did not answer at all.

He tried again. "Good thing I had two of my best men right there in the church parking lot."

Judith said nothing.

"When they got to you," said the detective, "he had you in the boiler room, with your face on the concrete and his knee in the middle of your back, and he was tinkering with the gauges."

Judith shuddered. That part she didn't remember. All she remembered was heavy hands choking her, then nothing. Until she found herself being picked up, brushed off, and watching them take Doug away in handcuffs.

"Are you okay?" the detective asked. "Say something."

Judith cleared her throat and tried out her voice. "He killed Eloise," she said unsteadily.

"So it is alleged, yes."

Judith had a handle on this kettle of fish now. "He kilned her," she declared, as crisp as bisque, "but he should have never said 'die.' He Doug his own grave." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE GRAFTON GIRLS

by Dennis Murphy

Canadian Dennis Murphy is an award-winning documentary film producer, director, and writer who presently lives in Toronto. Last year he attended a mystery writing course taught by *EQMM* contributor Peter Robinson at the University of Toronto. The following story emerged from that course. Its idyllic setting was inspired by the small towns in Ontario in which Mr. Murphy has lived.

Anne Marie Grafton frowns at me from under the dryer and between the hand-printed specials taped on the window of Irene's Cut and Curl. When she recognizes my uniform she offers up a half smile and a curt nod, the modern acknowledgment of inferiors by ladies of the manor.

To me, her subdued greeting confirms she is as ignorant of my morning visit to her "manor" as the village of Mayfield is of her transgressions, and those of her sister Jane.

My uniform, and my vocation, for the moment, is that of a dot-com delivery man. A hexagonal soft cap with a stiff peak matches my forest-green jacket and perma-press trousers. The shiny black plastic peak reflects the company logo above it, and the jacket sports an orange oval on the right breast pocket bordering the embroidered name "Roy." That's not my name—it came with the jacket—but Anne Marie and Jane Grafton, and most of my customers in the city and surrounding towns, call me Roy. And that's been fine with me. In their busy and important worlds my customers tap into a Web site and order the groceries they haven't time to shop for, so they're not likely to find much time to ask, or care, if Roy's my real name.

It's probably best the Grafton Girls don't know.

I'm from Mayfield, originally. I was born here and grew up here and went to the same Mayfield High as Paddy Grafton after he came back from the city with his mother Anne Marie. Most of you will know Patterson "Paddy" Grafton better as Gaylord Patterson,

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his pseudonym as an actor, female impersonator, and, many feel, an over-the-top prancing homosexual, until he succumbed sadly and painfully to AIDS-related diseases more than three years ago. Anne Marie and Jane buried him at St. Marks, and colleagues, acquaintances, lovers, and pretenders came from miles around. National press reported that Anne Marie starred as the bereaved mother.

But he was just Paddy Grafton when he arrived in Mayfield after his father died. The town hasn't changed much since. It's still a village despite the march of mega-cities and multiple area codes. Anne Marie seemed to have married without effect, for she came back a Grafton, as she had left, and her adopted son shared her surname. Not without reason: Being a Grafton in Mayfield was a cut above the crowd. Graftons had been mayors here, pioneers when they had the physical strength and sense of purpose that rots with time and technology, entrepreneurs when sweat and not wit was the oil of industry, business people when they found they could sell that which was envied by others as long as it was owned by them.

Some, like Anne Marie and Jane, now in their seventies and independently wealthy clan matriarchs, had inherited the spoils of those efforts. Others, like my parents, had been ruined by them.

It was a mark of the Grafton girls' sense of personal superiority that they called me "Roy," insisted I take my shoes off when I carried boxes of grocery staples into their kitchen, and cared little that I was born a Mayfield boy, holder of several "Participant" ribbons from the J. K. Grafton Elementary School science fairs, and, in high school, proud winner of a bronze in the under-sixteen's 440-yard race. Paddy Grafton played sick on the Bethesda District High School's "May-Field Days" and was never punished for it. We thought it was because he was a Grafton, or maybe because he was adopted.

I call it "Grafton Manor" as a joke, because it's not at all an impressive home. Nice, but nothing special. More suitable for me than for the Grafton Girls. Where once their family owned wooden Victorian castles with porches larger than subdivision lots and flower gardens bigger than country cemeteries, the Girls now live in a surprisingly modest grey brick infill house, one story at the front, split level to the back, at the very end of Main Street, where the town is interrupted by a broad creek and lowlands that flood with the winter runoff in the spring and deny development the rest of the year.

They'd bought the place when Anne Marie had returned to Mayfield. She and Sid, her no-name husband, loyal Aunt Jane, and little Paddy Grafton lived away from Mayfield for fourteen years. Anne Marie's husband had been a car salesman in the city—Ponti-

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acs mostly, I think. It was generally felt that she had married beneath the Grafton measure. But Sid—just Sid, with no memorable or ever presented surname—was a charming and handsome man and swept the young Mayfield heiress off her well-shod feet, conquering her with un-Presbyterian aggressiveness and public displays of affection. Whether Sister Jane ever experienced a similar passion was unknown, a credit to her discretion which, I have since discovered, went beyond mere personal privacy and all the way to hell.

I was introduced to the manor on my first trip back to Mayfield in many years. I had wangled this job delivering groceries over a large route that included Mayfield as its western limit. Beneath and behind and within the village's old-fashioned purity, its cartoon rural perfection, lived a number of people who ordered groceries on the Internet. Driving through town, it was difficult to believe that a grid of hi-tech communications pulsed below the broad streets lined with ancient maples and oaks and elms, over the schoolyard where primarily white children played nonviolent sports, or through the small but vibrant business district which had, so far, succeeded in denying McDonald's a venue. But then it was hard to believe that my fifties-throwback, retro uniform was a marketing tool for an Internet corporation that sold overpriced groceries to people without the time or energy to buy dog food and bulk detergent for themselves. I think the uniform was designed to nudge nostalgia, to remind people that customer service was once an adjunct to retail sales. I'm certain it was that uniform, that secure, terrorless, Mayfieldlike echo of the fifties which the company uses on billboards and the side panels of my oversized cube van, that first allowed Emma to trust me.

My schedule is pretty tight. I have to be at the warehouse in the east end of the city at six A.M. each day. The overnight guys have loaded my van with as much as they can, each box or boxes marked with a customer's name and—here's the problem—a time of delivery. The company feels it's important to offer its customers specific delivery times so that they can be present to receive their groceries (and pay the bills), even though the bulk of what they order is nonperishable. It's a customer-friendly idea and we're trained to be customer-friendly, but you can imagine the complications. Many people order because both spouses work all day, so I have an abundance of evening deliveries, or deliveries to foreign nannies who don't know why I'm knocking at the door, who don't understand that the check on the telephone table has been left for me, and who are terrified that grocery delivery is the new device of uniformed serial killers. (Or maybe cereal killers.) I suppose we must admit we now live in a world where leaving a box of groceries on the steps is regarded as risky, but it's not so in Mayfield.

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I was moved to discover that, in spite of listed delivery times which I had worked hard to meet, I was often left a note pinned to an open door asking me to enter and leave the boxes in the kitchen or under the picnic-table umbrella by the back door. Blank checks were left for me, or complicated instructions as to where in town I could find the customer and be paid.

Even the Grafton Girls, as village-busy and as urban-educated as they were, shared the moral tenets of Mayfield. I had successfully made the noon to one P.M. Wednesday delivery twice, and was proud of that. On the first visit there was a beige Toyota in the driveway and Jane had met me at the door, asked me to remove my shoes and carry the boxes—they usually ordered enough for two full boxes—into the kitchen and put them on the counter. Try holding two large cardboard boxes packed with cans and sugar and pasta and such and taking off your shoes. Try it. On the counter she had a printout of what she'd ordered by computer. While I waited in my socks she checked her list against the delivery, punctuated the agreements with short sharp breaths from her nose, then finished writing a prepared check by filling in the numbers plus the tax. I waited for her to recognize me, but she never looked at my face, just my chest, when she said, "Thank you, Roy." I nodded and left, thrilled to be back in my old town, confused about my sour feelings toward Lady Jane Grafton.

The next week Anne Marie was home, her green compact Chevy in the drive and her hair crimped to perfection the way some women in their seventies seem to like it. She treated me to the same process as had sister Jane: shoes off, check the delivery, and, "Thank you, Roy."

The third week both Graftons were home. They had something to say. When you put them side by side Anne Marie is easily the elder of the two, Jane the taller and prettier. Anne Marie is blond, or at least an off-white tint she imposes on her hairdresser. Jane has straight, thick black hair streaked with grey which she either refuses to color or ignores completely. I suspect the latter. Jane's all business where Anne Marie's all powerful, and likes it that way. Jane acts as the leader, although I felt somehow that Anne Marie had allowed that to be. They gave you a feeling of their unity, but a prenegotiated one; that it was Jane's "turn" to lead for some reason, that Anne Marie had already "done her bit." Just a feeling.

I wasn't usually this sensitive but I had that empty-stomach feeling they were going to cancel the service, that I had let them down, that in spite of other (less prestigious, in my mind) customers in Mayfield, the company would decide to deny service this far from the city and I wouldn't get to come back here. And I love this town.

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But that wasn't it. They wanted to talk delivery details in the kitchen. Life's pressures were imposing on the Grafton Girls, and I was part of the problem. Every Wednesday morning from nine to eleven Jane had Aquafitness. Every Wednesday morning from ten to twelve Anne Marie had her hair done at Irene's Cut and Curl. And now, every Wednesday at twelve-thirty they were to attend a library board lunch, the library board finally having succumbed to stuffing its board with local prestige in the attempt to stuff its coffers with local money. Because Mayfield was Wednesdays-only delivery, I was a problem, but the answer wasn't difficult, even without shoes on.

Sometime Wednesday mornings or early afternoons, we agreed, I would deliver the groceries. That was good for me; it loosened up my schedule for other customers who were waiting. I would place the boxes around the back of the house on the lower level, inside a hinged wooden bench between the back door and the sliding glass door so that raccoons and squirrels couldn't break in. Inside the bench would be a check for the amount of the previous week's groceries, including tax.

"Problem?" asked Jane.

"No problem."

"Thank you, Roy." Put your shoes on. Dismissed.

The next Wednesday I arrived in Mayfield at about ten A.M., having already delivered a quarter of my load to customers in the west of the city, in Dearing and Bethesda. I had been trying to get the office to talk to the people in those towns to see if the afternoon wouldn't be just as convenient for them. It would for me. But ideas from drivers about efficiency weren't found at the top of the suggestion box.

I sang. I sing a lot when I drive, sometimes with the radio but mostly I make songs up. It fills the time and sometimes the rhymes make me laugh. With another quarter load to be left in Mayfield this morning and the final half for evening drops back in the city, I had some time to waste. Maybe a breakfast.

But first I drove to the manor and pulled into the empty drive. I opened the back of the van and lugged two boxes of groceries down the side steps to the sunken backyard. It smelled swampy down there but most of the runoff from the creek had receded and only the gray-brown bent reeds were evidence of the recent spring flooding and the direction of the high-water flow. I opened the bench seat, put the grocery boxes inside, closed the lid. Jeez. The bill. I ran up the steps, grabbed the papers clipped to the dashboard, pulled out "Grafton," and ran back down to the bench. I swore the curtain on the sliding glass door moved. Just a little, but I swear it. I put the bill in the box and slammed the seat closed. I waited for a moment, watching the curtain. Nothing happened.

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Maybe it was a draft. Maybe they have a cat. Maybe one of them was making sure I did as I was told.

The moment unnerved me enough that I drove past Irene's and saw Anne Marie in the dryer chair. I drove to the combination library-fitness center and saw Jane's Toyota in the parking lot. Maybe it was a cat. Or a ferret—some people have weasels in their homes on purpose. I went for lunch at B&J's Diner and buried my curiosity in a coffee and two of the best butter tarts on earth. The woman behind the counter had huge brown eyes and a nice manner. I love this town.

I was back in Mayfield the next Wednesday at nine A.M., in the rain, early because the office had convinced the Dearing and Bethesda customers to accept afternoon delivery. Surprise. This meant my routine wasn't what we delivery people call a "doughnut" (thick at both ends, nothing in the middle) but constant throughout the day. In truth it made for a busier, better day, and it let me drive out early, straight against the traffic, to Mayfield as the farthest point from the warehouse, then work my way back throughout the afternoon and evening. I had my breakfast at B&J's—butter tarts, you'd better believe it—and caught the big brown eyes of the waitress I'd noted on my last visit. This time she caught my eye, too. I had a second coffee and watched her smile and move. Brunette, hair piled up with a few loose strands falling on each side of her cheeky, maybe even freckled, face. Nice upper body but I couldn't see over the counter to check out her legs and what they used to call her "carriage." Another time. She had a name pin on her apron but it was white on brass and I couldn't read it in the fluorescent light. I made certain she could see my "Roy," and wished for once it had been my own name.

I'd forgotten about the cat when I pulled into the manor driveway, wipers whipping, at about ten-thirty. I shoved the invoice in my jacket to keep it dry and rolled up the back door of my van to find the delivery boxes. I stacked them and negotiated the slippery, wet railroad-tie stairs down to the back door. I set the boxes down on wet patio stones and opened the seat. The check was in a white envelope with "Roy" written on it. I left the seat open and lifted both boxes before they became soaked. I was holding both of them between my belly and my nose when the curtain on the sliding door whipped open and the oddest-looking woman I'd ever seen smiled at me through misapplied lipstick, gave me a shy little wave with long white fingers, and pulled the curtain closed. It took a second. My chin and the boxes dropped at the same time; the bottom box fell into the bench and the top one spilled on the patio. A bag of flour broke and blew over the stones until the rain soaked it still and turned it to cement. I kept staring at the window, willing a replay. What had I seen? Miss Havisham? Mother

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Bates? The reflection of the sky and trees on the rain-stained glass had distorted a perfect view. She seemed to have been in some kind of long robe. I think. She had long blond hair. Or was it a hood? Her fingers were long and white with bright red nails, or could I have seen that? What was I already making up? I was confused. I felt . . . shocked—pumped by the mystery but strangely offended by the trespass. Mostly, as I calmed down, I was pissed off at the spilled flour all over the patio stones.

There was a rake and a broom, weathered and wet, by the side of the house, abandoned by some yard worker last fall. I broke up the wet flour with the rake and swept it into the grass with the sopping broom. I packed the rest of the groceries into the seat—the second box was soggy now—and closed it. Then I drove to the Safeway, picked up some all-purpose flour and another cardboard box, and went back. I refused to look at the door, like Anne Marie and Jane refused to look at my face, willing any mystery to disappear, knowing and afraid whatever it was would change me. The mere knowledge of someone inside would alter things, I felt, would adjust my feelings for Mayfield, for my place there, my newfound happiness at returning, and—what the hell—even for the brunette at B&J's. I repacked the boxes and left the invoice I'd again forgotten the first time, closed the bench, replaced the rake and broom, and skedaddled up the steps. For some reason I wanted my visit to have been invisible, to become the translucent Roy I already was to the Grafton Girls. Both of them. Or was it three of them?

On Friday night, right from the off-load at the warehouse, I went to visit my mother. It's a duty, and sometimes I feel better for it, but it's never what you'd call fun. Like staff meetings or tofu. She dotes on me now because I'm not in need of doting (at least not hers) and bemoans the fact that it's only the two of us left when she knows damned well she was even unhappier when there were three of us left. She's in her early eighties and divides her conversation between pride she's lived that long and how difficult it is to be that old. In her antiquity she's become a talented reader of medical journals and can identify fibromyalgia, macular degeneration, and every other disease-of-the-week for the elderly.

Despite her self-involvement which—face it—might be improved if I showed up more often, my mother still remembers the "good times," which she considers to be anything before we left Mayfield. Her family—the Filers—moved to Mayfield before she was born, so she considers herself a Mayfielder even though her parents were born in Bethesda—not like a Grafton, certainly, but a staunch claimant of the same proud heritage. She backs up this claim of hers with a studious devotion to all things Mayfieldian, to the comings and goings of its people, the history and the gossip of the village, the art and architecture and preservation that still

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places her town above once-similar villages, now gas-station-tire-store-mini-mart-stripped bedroom communities. The more she talks about it, the more she sounds like Anne Marie and Jane, and the more I realize the level of heartbreak she must have felt when she had to leave it, the absolute agony of lost birthright.

Tonight I need her. I bring flowers and a bottle of ten-dollar California Sauvignon Blanc, which offered three bonus air miles at point of purchase. I know she likes white wine (I don't), especially when it's cold and dry and crisp. The flowers are white carnations, which she dislikes when they're dyed pink and blue, but these seem to pass the purity test and rate a wet old kiss on my cheek.

We eat Lean Cuisine lasagna because she doesn't want to go out—because the last time she went out she had Chinese food from that nice Oriental man's restaurant but he's moved and now the egg rolls are dry and the sweet and sour sauce tastes like the pot it was made in. I eat three packages of the lasagna, because they're small, and remind myself to fill her larder (I can get ten percent off) while she insists I eat more—until she counts the empty cardboard boxes in the kitchen recycling box.

But she knows her Mayfield. I tell her what I'm doing and she bemoans the fact that advanced degrees in eighteenth century Irish literature don't get you a good job anymore. But she stops that old rant when I mention Mayfield. Her visage changes, her posture shifts, and her voice becomes so . . . proper. She becomes a Filer from Mayfield and I'm embarrassed at how easy it is to open her memories.

"The Grafton Girls, ah yes. The Grafton Girls . . ." I think she's sleeping but she's just rebooting her data files.

"Their father, Herbert Grafton, Herbert Patterson with two *ts* Grafton, was mayor for two terms when I was a girl. He would have served three but it wasn't legal. Millie was his wife. She was a Douglas. The Grafton girls were younger than I was. I remember the second one, Emma, no, Jane, yes, Jane, being born. She'll be old now."

"Seventy-odd," I said, "but still good-looking."

"Mmm. Anne. Anne Marie was the eldest, I think. At least, she was closest to me in school. A year ahead of Jane. Pretty, too, but in a wispy way, a—I hate to say it—but a blond way." She sipped some wine and smacked her lips like she was in a summer Coke TV ad. I topped it up for her.

"You were in school with both of them?"

"Yes. Yes, I was. We liked Mansel Adams, I remember. All of us girls. Even Jane, who wasn't . . . who didn't . . . who usually ignored boys. He was younger than we were, a poor boy but a strapping, fine-looking young man, quite the catch if status was not the issue. Which it was, my dear. Which it was, of course, espe-

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cially for the Grafton girls."

"Anne Marie is bossy now . . ."

"Yes, I'm sure, dear. Anne Marie was a plotter then, too, a schemer. She organized cliques and gangs of girls. She always had plans to push something—who the cheerleaders should be, or who the Red Cross Club president should be. You went nowhere without her backing. She wasn't, I'd say, a nice person. Not at all. If she couldn't have Mansel, then no one could. So she destroyed him because she couldn't have him. Started rumors. She was like that. She used Jane like a recording secretary and treated poor Emma like a house pet."

"Emma?"

"Yes, Emma. A sweet, pretty, fair slip of a thing. A bit airy-fairy, some said, if you know what I mean." She circled her fingers beside her head.

"A sister? A Grafton?" I leaned forward. She had me and she knew it. She tapped the flange of her glass on the side table and I filled it up with wine.

"Oh yes, dear, the third of the three Grafton Girls, and the one least impressed with herself, although Jane was always practical about heritage. It was Anne Marie who lorded it over the town, Anne Marie who tyrannized everyone, until she married that Sidney Whatsit and moved to the city so he could sell his automobiles. The natural rumors had it that she married him because she was pregnant. It was the fifties then, you know; girls did that. But even if that was true, she never had a child by him. Otherwise why would she have adopted that gay boy . . . that Paddy. He had a movie name."

"Gaylord Patterson."

"Yes." She laughed out loud. Mum's a bit pissed, I thought. "I never saw the connection before. Poor old Herbert Patterson Grafton must roll in his grave. Gaylord perhaps, but Patterson? Oh dear." She laughed and spilled some Sauvignon.

"Back up a bit. Anne Marie went to the city. Was she finished with school?"

"Oh yes, dear. She did quite well in school when it came down to marks. That or she bullied the teachers—no, that's not fair of me; what am I saying? She'd begun work for a Mayfield lawyer named . . . named . . . escapes me now, and would go with all the youngsters in cars to the lake on weekends. That's where she met Sidney. I wish I could remember his name. You'll think I have that forgetting disease, Roy, that Als . . . Als . . ."

"Alzheimer's, Mum. And the others?"

"What others? The girls? Oh, Jane followed Anne Marie to the city after a year or two, after she finished school. She was always following Anne Marie or being told to. Then Emma went, too. But

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before she finished school, I think. I don't really remember. I was older than they were. They weren't my friends. I was working then, too, and taking up with your father, so I'm not as clear as I should be. I just remember all three Grafton Girls were in the city. Living in the same apartment block, I think."

"Until when?"

"Well, dear, until poor Sidney Whatsit died, of course. Years later. I swear he wasn't yet cold when Anne Marie arrived back in Mayfield calling herself a Grafton and with an adopted pretty teenaged son named Paddy, somehow a Grafton, too. No wonder no one can remember poor Sidney's name."

"What *happened*—"

"And Jane, dear Jane, too smart and too strong to attract a man, they said, dear Jane not days behind. They bought a house—not one of the old Grafton houses but a small house, a new house it was, then, at the edge of town, by the creek."

"And Emma?"

"Emma didn't come back with them. Something about meeting a man and going out West."

"Did anyone ask?"

"Well, no, dear. It fell between events, you see. You'd be fourteen or fifteen by then. I don't know if you remember Gay—Paddy Grafton in high school, but he was upsetting the entire town with his antics and his friends who would come up from the city and embarrass everyone. They'd skip school and drink red wine and wear odd clothes, and rumors were terrible about some of the things they did. One of the Downie boys and a girl named Susan who wore black all the time. . . . Anne Marie would say nothing against him and even Jane, who you'd think knew better, was Paddy's biggest fan. Emma was just . . . forgotten, I guess. Herbert and Millie were dead by then. There was no one to care about what happened to Emma. Gone and forgotten."

I poured what I was surprised to see was the last of the wine in her glass. She smiled, as if sharing a secret vice, as I stood up and put on my jacket.

"It was nice talking about the old days," she said. "And to pass some of them on to you. It's your life, too."

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. "It is. And thanks for that." I bent toward her. She looked relaxed, even happy. Her kiss on my cheek was stronger, longer this time and she sat there smiling after me until I closed the door. It had been more enjoyable than I expected, except for being called Roy by my own mother.

The next Wednesday delivered Mayfield the Perfect. Its citizens hustled to work or shopping or other local activities with smiles on their faces and the warmth of a promising sun on their cheeks. The willows near the wetlands were yellow with buds and the

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maples and lindens showed a green blush, while the wiser oaks waited warily for spring to prove its case before they passed either judgment or sap. The clouds in the sky were those puffy ones hung there for reasons of composition and guaranteed not to come between the sun and the citizens. If there was a day to shoot the National Geographic Special on the world's most perfect village, this was the day.

I think I must have known what I was going to do long before I did it, but I kidded myself that it was a whim I developed over breakfast. The brunette waitress at B&J's smiled at me, a smile of advanced recognition, I was certain, and delivered my coffee and butter tarts with an even bigger smile, and an appraising look. She put my butter tarts down slowly with ringless fingers, and a "There you go, Roy," and leaned forward so I could see a bit of cleavage and read "Barb" on her nametag. I had been here often enough now to recognize some regulars: town businessmen, a policeman, the hardware-store woman. It felt good. Maybe I'd become a regular, too. I'd have dawdled but Emma was on my mind.

Singing a song with no words, I drove past the library-fitness center to confirm Jane's attendance, or at least her Toyota's, past Irene's to see Anne Marie in the chair, then I circled around and backed into the manor driveway. There was only one box ordered this week but it was a heavy one and I lugged it down the steps with some trouble. We've been taught how to lift and carry, but the warehouse guys load by volume, not by weight. My back hurt. Maybe I should submit another suggestion.

I grunted and whistled and realized I was trying to announce my presence to someone. The curtain was closed and not moving. I made a show of putting the box down, pulling the invoice out of my jacket and checking it stupidly against the closed box, as if I was being watched. I opened the wooden seat and removed the envelope with a flair, taking the time to open it and whistle louder as I senselessly checked the amount against a record I didn't have with me. I decided to increase the bait. Change the lure. I sang. Loudly, and like Ricky Ricardo.

"When I salsa with my Emma,

The other boys say, 'No problema' . . ."

I couldn't think of any more rhymes. I slammed the bench seat and pushed the sliding glass door. It opened. It was stiff. It hadn't been used often. But it opened. I looked behind me once and went in.

It was hot inside and smelled like the room hadn't had air for months. It wasn't unpleasant, just a mix of chalky concrete, damp rugs, and furnace electrics that combine to taste metallic at the back of the mouth. I was in a room with an old couch piled with

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liquor-store boxes that looked as if they might have held Christmas decorations. I left the patio door open to air the place out and shuffled toward a light at the bottom of a set of stairs that probably descended from the kitchen. Halfway up was a landing and the door that went out to the side driveway.

I felt a need to be silent. The house rang with the wreak and wrack of wood, and that *tick tick tick* of the heating system. I went down the hall past the furnace room to a door with a large shiny brass handle and a lock like you'd see on the outside entrance of a model home. Above that, clamped closed in a thick hasp loop, was one of those keyed locks made of many layers of guaranteed unbreakable metal, and to its right, centered about five feet off the ground, an apartment-style fisheye peephole.

I listened at the door and thought I could hear music. I tapped softly. It must have been music, or humming, because it stopped. I tapped again.

"Hello? Hello?" I was whispering as loudly as I could. Whispering to a wooden door.

"Is anyone there?" A woman's whisper.

"Hello?" I said.

"Who's there?" she said. "Is it you, Anne Marie? Is it Jane? Oh Jane, it's been so long. Why don't you ever . . ."

"It's . . . um . . . Roy," I said. "The grocery man. The delivery man." I stepped back so she could see me through the peephole. Maybe she could see my oval patch.

"The man in the truck? The man with the nice uniform? You used to come into the kitchen. I heard your feet on the floor."

"Yes, I did. Now I deliver at the back door. I saw you last week. Moving the curtain." I was talking in short dumb sentences as if she were stupid or didn't speak English. "It was me you saw there. Are you Emma?"

"You know me? You know my name?"

"Can you get out of there, Emma? Can you leave?"

"Oh, no. No, I can't. She lets . . . they let me out when they're home now, but not when they're away. Not ever. Except when they forget. Except when one thinks the other's done it. They lock me up Wednesdays now because they go away until after lunch."

"Can you see me, Emma? Look through the hole. Can you see me?"

"No, I can't. It doesn't work that way." I moved up to the peephole and put my eye to it. It was installed so people outside could look in. I saw a vague outline of a person in whitish clothes surrounded by sparkles of light. Candles, I guessed.

"I see you," I said. "Emma, listen to me. Do you want help? Do you want to get out of there?"

"Oh yes, sir. I do. I do. They took my baby and I want him back."

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I could hear her sobbing behind the door, but not so loud that I didn't hear the car pull in the driveway.

"Wednesday, Emma. Be ready. I'll be back. Someone's here. Do the door." I raced down the hallway and out the sliding door, drawing it closed and flipping open the box seat in one motion.

"Roy? What are you doing down there?" It was Anne Marie, leaning around the corner of the house at the top of the stairs. Sounding like a blue jay. And looking like one, too. Her hair was covered with bits of tied paper and blue gooey stuff under a clear plastic rain hat.

"Just checking the order, Ms. Grafton." I hoped she couldn't see how red I must be from that distance. I was dripping with perspiration. "Little confusion about that spilled flour last week. Office won't repay me for replacing it so I was leaving you a note asking . . ."

"I'll call them. Just leave things be. Just deliver and leave now."

Bossy was right. I headed for the steps as she let herself in the side door, mumbling about stains on her dress and wiping her chest with a towel from the salon. She slammed the door as I jumped in my cab, sweating like a fire-eater and feeling just as thirsty. But rather pleased with my fast dancing. I couldn't leave with her little Chevy still in the driveway so I used the time to take a few deep breaths and by the time she came out with a paper-covered dress flapping on a cleaner's hanger, I was able to smile my delivery man's smile and give her my delivery man's salute as we both pulled out of the drive. She ignored me.

The next week couldn't happen fast enough. Thursday, Friday, Saturday I drove around three sides of the city thinking about the fourth. Sunday I was off, and Monday, too, in lieu of Saturday, so I did some thinking. Emma Grafton was locked up in a nineteen-fifties brick split-level house by her two sisters, Anne Marie and Jane. Why would they do that? How long had they been doing it? How long did they plan on doing it? Too many questions for me. I needed to talk to someone who knew something. Anything.

The handy little Mayfield section of the municipal phone book was no longer. Now you had to wade through the whole damned white pages to search for someone. Bigger ain't better, except in the minds of those who see humans as constituents.

There were three Downies in the book. Only one in Mayfield, and that was James. We called him Jimmy, or more often "Wood Pecker" or "Peckerhead" when we were kids. He wasn't home, and his wife, the former Elizabeth Beatty, whom I remember as younger than our gang and having thick legs, didn't even ask who I was. When I asked for the number for Jimmy's brother Ken, she unpleasantly gave me one of the other numbers in the telephone book. A city number. She sounded like she still had thick legs and hated it.

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Kenneth Downie was at home and would see me Monday evening. He didn't sound gay, but he was one of the small group that hung out with Paddy in high school, and he may have continued the friendship, if that's what it was. At least he could tell me what had gone on in the crazy teen world of Gaylord Patterson.

Ken should be the poster man for gay guys. It would solve a lot of homophobia, attitudes that people like Gaylord Patterson seem determined to engender rather than defeat. Kenneth Downie was a good-looking man with no discernible effeminate gestures or tics. He had held the same job since graduating from college, which is more than I had done, and been with one partner for almost as long, which is more than I had even come close to doing. The partner, a nice guy named Bill with a good handshake, left us to ourselves. Their house was nice without being one of those places that seems to loudly lust for its own television program. But rather than admit my sad stereotyping I came right to the point.

"I'm trying to find out more about Paddy Grafton," I said. "I knew him slightly in high school. I hung out with your brother Jim."

"So you want to know about Gay . . . we all called him Gaylord—he loved that," said Ken. "That takes me back. We were just teenage actors overacting, playing roles in high school and later, when we shared an apartment. I didn't even know I was gay then. Susan didn't know that her writing was actually good. People couldn't see past our style, so we just played games we designed to appall them. It wasn't very difficult in Mayfield."

"It's the earlier stuff I want to know," I said. "Did you know Gaylord before he came to Mayfield?"

"Only by reputation. We'd all heard about the mad Paddy Grafton, adopted heir to the Graftons of Mayfield, but we didn't get to know him until they came back."

"What was he like?"

"He was bad." Ken laughed, more at the larger thought than any anecdotal specific. "He was all show, all the time. He never stopped. Never. And he was cruel—without thought, or care, or ever an apology. He hurt everyone and anyone. Especially those of us who supported him"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he'd say anything about anyone and repeat it until it became true. He was cruel to me, to all his friends, to his family . . ."

"How cruel? To them, I mean. To his family?"

"Well, he'd mock them. I remember he always carried a large bag, bigger than a purse, smaller than a suitcase, a leather one that closed at one end with a zipper. When he was in trouble at home, which was almost always, he'd rant and impersonate his

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aunt by using her voice—he had an amazing ability to copy voices—and moving the open zipper of the bag like a giant synchronized mouth. Big Bag Mouth he called her. It was actually very funny."

"That was Aunt Jane?"

"Oh no, that was Imperial Anne Marie. How he hated her, or so he said. He loved Jane—she was his protector, come hell or high water. He started a fire in her apartment in the city once and she redecorated it without saying a word. She was what he called the good aunt. He called Anne Marie the bad aunt. And she hated that. She insisted she was his mother and listed the history of her child-rearing agonies every time he started his 'bad aunt' stuff. He always said his mother was 'the one who went away.' We didn't understand him, and he would become very angry at that. It's the one thing he never made fun of. That's the only thing he never allowed."

I thanked Ken and waved goodbye to Bill. Ken was walking me to the door when he stopped and said: "Wait a minute. I have something that you, or maybe the family, might want." When he came back he walked me down to the street where he gave me a plastic bag rolled around a long, thin object. I didn't open it.

"He used this in the school play. They'll remember. He was Brutus—he found the name hilarious and wanted to be called 'Cutest.' I guess Gaylord was his own worst enemy," he said.

"Oh, I think he had worse enemies than himself," I said. "Than most of us."

All day Tuesday was waiting for Wednesday. In between city deliveries I purchased a list of hero's necessities at the hardware store and stationer's. I picked up some cardboard boxes at the liquor store. "Be prepared" rang in my head—the musty motto of the 3rd Mayfield Cub Pack.

I was up early Wednesday morning and tried out my pack-by-weight-not-by-volume idea on the guys at the loading dock. Not a great reception. Maybe it was too early. I left the warehouse in time to arrive in Mayfield just after the sun came up, singing to myself all the way and searching for rhymes for Emma, which, besides poetic leaps like "henna" and "llama," has few, if any, in English. Try it. Okay, dilemma. In the back, I had my deliveries and empty liquor boxes. Beside me in the cab I had my invoices, my delivery list, a new extra-long gym bag with the next Olympic logo on the side, and my Sir-Lancelot-Round-Table all-purpose save-the-maiden-and-find-the-grail tool kit. It weighed about a hundred pounds.

I was more than just pleased to find Barb the brunette already pouring coffee at B&J's. I nodded and smiled to her and she did the same right back with what I felt was increased personal com-

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mitment. As I walked in she was returning from the tables to the counter and I finally confirmed that her "carriage" was just fine, thank you very much. I nodded to a couple of regulars and imagined they nodded back. Because I was early, and because Barb was beautiful, I had a few more cups of coffee than usual. I waited until nine A.M. before I left, knowing Anne Marie wouldn't leave until ten, but I wanted to squeeze every minute possible for the valiant and knighthood-worthy actions I had decided to take.

I drove by the library-fitness center and was lucky enough to see Jane getting out of her Toyota, walking toward the gymnasium door with a gym bag and a zippered travel clothing bag draped over her arm. Maybe she'd stay there and change before her luncheon. But maybe not. She could still come back home at eleven, so I had to be finished by then. I took the west road out of town, dropping off some boxes on the way, and drove down to the next side road, then back east again so I could enter Main Street from the country side and not pass Anne Marie if she'd left early for Irene's. The Chevy was still in the drive, so I circled the village once, then again, and made the rest of my Mayfield deliveries just to keep my head in the game. On my next pass she was gone and I pulled in. It was nine fifty-three. If I was lucky I had an hour, unless Irene spilled blue goo on Anne Marie's dress again or Jane pulled an old muscle under water.

In my passion for heroism I took my Lancelot bag of tricks but forgot the groceries and had to run back to get them and put them in the seat box. I kept the check and threw the invoice in the box. They'd be needing less food next week with Emma gone.

I slammed the seat, picked up my bag, and looked around the yard and swamp. Here goes, Lancelot. I think I'd hurriedly asked her to "do the door" last week and could only hope that she knew what I'd meant. It opened smoothly, smoother than last week, I thought. I closed it behind me and moved quickly to the bottom of the stairs. I had shims in my bag, thin wedges of cedar from the hardware store, and I jammed one under the kitchen door at the top of the stairs, and another under the driveway exit door. They wouldn't stop anyone, but they might slow people down.

I went to Emma's door and tapped. Eye to the peephole. At first I heard nothing and saw nothing, and felt, for a desperate moment, that she'd left home. But then I heard a soft voice, scared, I thought, and a wraith moved between the sparkling lights and the center of the eyepiece.

"Hello?"

"Emma," I said, "I'm going to get you out of here. Stand back from the door." I pulled a pair of new thirty-six-inch red-handled bolt cutters from my bag. My set of carbonized lock pickers fell on the floor. Be prepared, indeed.

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"Hello?"

"Yes, Emma. What is it?"

"She keeps the keys out there somewhere. Anne Marie. I hear her fetching them when she comes. They're somewhere out there."

I swore softly and went back down the hall. It was easy. At the bottom of the stairs was a nail, and on it a key chain with two keys, one silver, one gold. I don't know how I missed them.

The silver one undid the unbreakable hasp lock and the gold one matched the elaborate front-door lock set. The door opened and there was Emma. In what looked like her pajamas.

She stood aside, proudly, I thought, and I went in, adjusting my eyes to the candlelight as she closed the door behind me.

It was a shrine. A shrine and a bedroom. A shrine and a bedroom and an overheated prison. Posters of Gaylord Patterson mincing his way to stardom covered all of the walls and ceiling. Cork message boards hung, crammed with damp and droopy eight-by-ten glossies of Gaylord. I had ceased to think of him as Paddy now. Gaylord with everyone: Gaylord with gushing movie stars, Gaylord with cigar-mouthed agents, Gaylord with bored film crews, Gaylord with societal tastemakers, Gaylord with political leaders proving their tolerance for all mankind, and Gaylord, dashing and proprietary, seated with good-looking young men at restaurant tables littered with used linen napkins and empty bottles of very good wine.

At one end of the narrow room was a rack, one of those galvanized pipe structures on wheels that they haul out at church suppers to hang coats. But this one seemed to be draped with colored feathers and sequins and shiny metallic bits of cloth like supplies for a kindergarten craft class, until I realized it was clothing—the jackets and skirts, the boas and bell-bottoms of a man who liked to dress as a woman. When I turned back to Emma, she was sitting on what I now saw to be a bed. Watching me. She smiled and said: "Hello, Ray."

"Roy. Roy," I said, stabbing my finger at the jacket oval, not wanting to ruin this mission with a silly explanation of names. I was nervous. I checked my watch. Slow down.

"I'm sorry. Hello, Roy," she said. She had a pleasant voice. She didn't sound nuts. Or even look too loony. She patted the bed beside her to show me where to sit, and she smiled. A beautiful smile, as pretty as the day outside which, in this dungeon, I had completely forgotten.

"Did you know my son?" She waved her arm around the room like a magician's assistant robotically pointing out a wonder, a two-dimensional wax museum.

"I did. I did. I knew Gay . . . Paddy when he came back to May-

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field with his mother and aunt—er, I guess, his aunts? Is that right? They're his aunts? You're his mother?"

"Yes, I am, Roy. He is my son. He is the son of me and of . . ."

"Let me guess. Mansel Adams?"

"Yes, Roy. I loved Mansel. He loved me. It made Anne Marie very angry. Very angry. When she found I was pregnant she took me away, took me out of school and to an apartment in her building until I had the baby. And then she took my baby."

"What happened to you? Did you go out West with a man like they said?"

"Not with anyone. I traveled for a while, trying to forget. I worked waitressing in places and then moving on to others. For a long time. I came back here when Paddy was about nineteen. He'd finished school by then and was living over on Main Street in an apartment with friends." Her eyes opened wide as if she'd seen candy, and her smile came up like the dawn.

"I saw him in the church basement," she whispered, savoring the memory. "I hid by a window and they were inside practicing some play. He was so beautiful. His hair was curly and long. He wore a scarf. I wanted him back so badly, I followed him home to his apartment. I knocked at the door. . . . He . . . he didn't know who I was. He was drunk, I think. He laughed at me. He called her Mother. Not me. Her. So I came here to confront her. And they locked me up."

"You've been kept down here ever since? Like . . ." I was trying to do the math.

"She still hates me. She thought I stole Mansel so she took Paddy from me. Stole Gaylord from me. Stole my son. He is famous and I'm proud of him and they have taken him from me and taken my pride for themselves. They stole him and they stole my pride. I want him back, Roy. And I want him back now."

She didn't know Gaylord was dead. Not my job. No thanks. I tried to shift gears.

"I have something for you," I said. "Do you remember a Kenneth Downie?"

She thought for a moment. "I don't think I do," she said. "Was he a friend of Paddy's?"

"Yes, at Bethesda District. They were in plays together."

"I . . . I wasn't . . . I missed those plays." She was starting to weep.

"Well, here's a souvenir," I said, and I handed her the package Ken Downie had given me. "He used it in *Julius Caesar* when he was Brutus."

"He would have hated that role," she said. I told her about him wanting to be called "Cutest" and she laughed again. I liked this lady. She was sorry but not for herself.

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She unrolled the plastic bag. In it was a stage dagger, about a foot long, half handle, half dull blade, a prop cast of cheap white metal that looked like chromed plastic. It was stained with age and neglect, but she treated it like a talisman, an icon, holding it up in front of her in both soft palms, turning it to catch the candlelight. I thought I saw a spotlight hit it. She looked from it to me and as she raised her head she smiled the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

Emma rose from the bed like a dancer, smoothly, all one movement without a distinct beginning or end. As she stood she moved to the wall, near the center, where a shelf held some papers, a framed photograph, and some candles in little colored glass cups, like in church. I followed her. She carefully laid the stage knife down on the shelf, on top of the papers. They seemed to be a worn script of some kind. The photograph was of Gaylord dressed like an old movie star whose name I couldn't remember but she was famous and sang, too, and had drug problems. Emma stood a moment as if in prayer, awaiting a response to the sacrament she'd offered. It must have come, because she sighed, looked at me again, and reached out to squeeze my arm.

"I want you to come with me, Emma. Today. I want to get you out of here to somewhere safe," I said.

Her smile waned and she shook her head. I couldn't believe it. Hello? Hello? Sir Lancelot here. Like, what part of saving your life don't you understand? I walked her back over to the bed and sat her down. I looked at my watch. It was ten forty-five. We had fifteen minutes at the most. I hadn't planned it this way.

"Emma. You must come with me. I have some boxes so you can take your favorite things. I have papers you can sign to give to the police. I have papers you can sign to give someone power of attorney so they can protect you." She was just grinning and shaking her head.

"I have an entire bloody set of the Staples home and business legal forms and more tools than I can count. You can stay at my mother's. I can help you, Emma. Emma!"

I was yelling. I couldn't get her to listen. The more uptight I became, the calmer she seemed to be. Her breathing was slow, and when she looked up at me again her face was at rest, her smile a breath of peace.

Ten minutes left at the outside. "Listen, Emma . . ."

She held up a hand, asking me to stop and blessing me at the same time. I felt the wind go out of my anger, I felt her calmness enter my heart. I breathed deeply a couple of times. Five minutes left. Thoughts of Anne Marie dropping in early. Of Jane changing her mind about her lunch attire. I stood up.

"I have to go, Emma. I can't be caught here. Please come with

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me." She shook her head, slowly, but without question. She wasn't coming. That was it. "Wait here," I said and ran out to the van. I'd forgotten how beautiful the day was, soft and cool and sunny, and blue and green and white, the opposite of the hot cell inside. I gathered as many liquor boxes as I could and ran back inside.

"Emma. Listen to me. Pack your things in these boxes. I know it's hard to leave them behind. Prepare yourself to escape this. I will be back here next Wednesday as early as possible. Then I'll take you away. I understand it's difficult to decide this today." I tried to hide my Round-Table, boy-hero disappointment, but I could be heroic next Wednesday.

"Just pack things up and make sure you leave the sliding door open and . . ."

She stood up and came purposefully toward me. She was almost as tall as I was and I was struck again by how beautiful she seemed, how the peace that had settled over her made her look ageless rather than a seventy-year-old prisoner in her own home. She put a long finger to my lips. It was warm and smelled of hand cream. She moved closer and hugged me, pulling me gently toward her. Then she raised her head and kissed me softly on the cheek. Not a peck. Not a smacker. A lingering, affectionate kiss without a definable beginning or ending. The kiss of a friend.

"See you next week, Roy," she whispered. "Now lock me up."

"My name's not Roy." It was all I could think of to say.

"What is it?" she asked softly. No one else had. So I told her.

I held her for a few seconds until she gave me a little push. I replaced the hasp lock and hung the keys at the bottom of the stairs. I closed the sliding door tight, climbed to the van, and turned right toward Bethesda. I didn't have the nerve to stay in Mayfield at that moment, although thoughts of Barb the brunette at B&J's made me sense I was returning to normal. I must have been. I remembered I'd left my tool kit, with its hundreds of dollars of useless maiden-saving tools and papers. As a knight, I was errant.

I rolled down my window and inhaled the country. The cherry blossoms were coming on just as the apple blossoms were fading. The sun was hot on the red barn roofs. There was rich black mud in the pastures and the cows moved their heads slowly and constantly as if they were on great painkillers and couldn't believe their luck.

I turned around in a farmer's driveway and drove back to town. That's where I started this story. I park, walk past Irene's, and receive Anne Marie's superior nod. I nod back, keep walking all the way to B&J's and ask Barb out for lunch. There's no place to go this early other than B&J's so she comes around the counter,

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takes her apron off, and sits down with me in a booth. The service is great, and not just because she's the B of B&J's. I love this town.

The next Wednesday morning presents Mayfield the Ugly, one of those sloppy late-spring snows that doesn't stay on the ground but makes you feel like any good weather to date has been a mean joke. I'm early, despite the slick roads, and I'm having coffee with Barb while I wait for my cue from King Arthur. The regulars are all at the counter, and I can identify them now as the insurance broker, the police chief, the H & R Block manager, the lady who owns the hardware store, and so on. I guess I'm becoming sort of a regular myself. The delivery guy. Roy.

I'm getting pumped to mount my white horse about nine forty-five when a blue and white regional cop car careens around the corner of Church Street, wags its tail wildly on the turn, and slithers to a stop outside. The top lights make crazy and the siren is left on as a young officer jumps from the driver's seat and, running so fast he trips over himself, bursts in the door.

"Chief. A big one. Main Street. The Grafton Girls."

Oh shit.

The chief runs out and they both take off. The rest mumble to each other as if whatever is happening will all be explained when the chief returns. I can't hear them. Maybe they're talking about the Graftons' insurance, or taxes, or tab at the hardware store. I'm fainting. I'm sick. I run out of the diner with Barb calling behind me. I wave her back and run. My truck is right down the street, but I run left toward the manor, three blocks in wet damned snow and I'm spent. I see the flashing lights far ahead and manage to run some more, but by the time I get there my guts are screaming and the front lawn is already enclosed by yellow crime tape. A small crowd of drivers have stopped on seeing the ambulance. Most of them stay in their cars, staring across the road.

The young officer from B&J's is asking them to move, to make room for the ambulance crew and scene-of-crime guys and paramedics who are rushing into the house with gurneys and black bags and imposing a bizarre order on the madness. The young cop has been sick on his chest and looks grayer than the sky. I stand in the driveway and watch the side door, the door that leads to the Grafton Girls.

Two men in white lab coats over their quilted ski jackets emerge with a black zippered bag hung between them. It looks like Jane's clothes bag but it isn't. A body bag. No stretcher. A dead person. I must have moved up because they push me out of the way and call the officer to get me the hell out of there. I back off toward the creek and wait. A second bag. I move a bit closer. This one closed, too. Oh my God. What has happened? And then a stretcher. A body wrapped on it, but a face showing. A living person. They push

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some latch that springs the legs and wheels out with a noise and push the body down the driveway. The police chief is beside it, holding a hand. It's Emma. I can see her white hair and her red cheeks. Blood on her red cheeks. It's Emma! I want to cheer. I run beside her, calling her name, but her eyes are fixed on the chief running on the other side. I think she hears me but I might be wrong. I see her lean toward the chief, but both of us are squeezed aside by the loading and door-slamming and the ambulance races off, leaving both of us watching it get smaller in the wet snow.

I stop staring when it disappears. The chief is still watching. I can see his breath as he stares down Main Street. My eyes drop to his badge and the brass nameplate seemingly required by all public servants, delivery men, and waitresses. His says "Chief Mansel Adams."

A man in a white coat covered in blood too red to be old comes up to the chief and has to cough twice before Mansel Adams pulls his eyes back from the distance, from the memories of what could have been his life. In a clear plastic zip-locked bag the white-coat man holds up a cheap metal stage dagger covered in bright fresh blood.

"They told her that Paddy was dead," the chief says to no one.

Et tu, Cutest.

Epilogue:

Barb gets up early to open the place and I show up about noon to help with the lunch crowd. She leaves at three to meet the school bus and get the kids to piano or hockey or dance or whatever, and I handle the usually light evening crowd. We don't offer liquor or full suppers so I've usually cleaned up and driven home by about seven.

When she opened the place it was her idea to call it "B&J's" so it would sound like a partnership. There never was a J. But now there is.

I fit right in once she learned my name wasn't Roy, and she learned it for sure when the police found Emma Grafton's Staples home and business legal forms, including the will that left the manor to me in no uncertain terms, and in my own name.

My mother lives in the basement but she can go and come as she pleases. She still calls me Roy sometimes. I love this town. ●

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FRUITCAKE

by Steve Hockensmith

Certain writers seem to find in Christmastime an irresistible setting for mystery, one that they return to year after year. Four of this issue's Christmas tales come from writers (Doug Allyn, Reginald Hill, John Mortimer, and Steve Hockensmith) who've had Christmas stories in previous years' *EQMM*s. Mr. Hockensmith's new holiday mystery is as wickedly funny as last year's. He's been busy in-between stories completing his first novel. ¶

Ethel Queenan decided on murder when she saw Connie Sandrelli sitting on Santa's lap.

Connie was an attractive woman, if you were one of those wolves who goes in for loose blouses and tight slacks and lots of hair. And she was a young woman—just sixty-five. Ever since she moved into the Always Sunny Trailer Park in Clearwater, Fla., the men there had been falling all over each other to drive her to the grocery store, show her how to play shuffleboard, mow the lawn around her mobile home, whatever she wanted whenever she snapped her relatively wrinkle-free, non-arthritic fingers.

The problem was, there weren't enough men to go around. Each year, five or six Always Sunny wives became Always Sunny widows, while the husband-to-widower conversion rate was much slower. As a result, the competition for available men was fierce. And Santa belonged to Ethel—whether he liked it or not.

Ethel's husband Ralph had passed two years before. He died the way he'd lived—cursing and drunk. Enraged by a fourth-quarter fumble during an Indiana University football game, he threw his beer at the television, then kicked in the screen when a Purdue linebacker ran the ball in for a touchdown. A lightning bolt of electricity ran up his Reebok and flash-fried Ralph Queenan where he stood.

Ethel considered him a martyr to Indiana collegiate athletics. She wrote the president of the university asking him to name a hall or a scholarship after Ralph, but she never received a

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response. That made her so mad she decided to burn all of Ralph's Indiana University memorabilia. She threw the sweatshirts and jackets and baseball caps and plastic cups and commemorative coins and Christmas tree ornaments in his Weber grill, doused it all with an entire can of lighter fluid, and tossed in a lit match. The resulting burst of flame singed off her eyebrows and set her neighbor's lemon tree on fire. The trailer park smelled like scorched lemon meringue pie for a month.

Despite her devotion to Ralph's memory, Ethel had been not-so-patiently waiting to replace her husband ever since the paramedics carted away his charbroiled carcass. She'd watched with growing fury as other widows—hussies, all of them, even the ones she'd once considered friends—snatched up each new widower as soon as he came on the market.

Ethel was at a temporary disadvantage, having no eyebrows and all. But even after they grew back bushier than ever, romance continued to bloom for others, not for her. She finally took a stand, rising up at a Fourth of July barbecue to declare, "I've waited long enough! The next single man in this park is mine! *Mine!*"

"The next single man" turned out to be Frank Schmidt, a retired postal worker from Duluth, Minnesota. He wasn't Ethel's type. With his pale skin and concave chest and bulbous gut balanced on spindly little legs, he looked nothing whatsoever like her dream man, Ricardo Montalban. But he fit her number-one requirement well enough: He was still breathing.

There are many unwritten laws in Florida's retiree-packed trailer parks and condo developments, and one of them is the four-week rule—a month-long moratorium on courting a widow or widower after the Dearly Departed has been laid to rest. Ethel made her move on Frank the day after the funeral.

First, she brought him a cake. The next day, she brought him Jell-O salad. The day after that, it was tuna casserole. And on the fourth day, she pulled out the big guns, making her intentions clear to one and all: She brought Frank Schmidt *a baked ham.*

Always Sunny was soon abuzz about Ethel's scandalous behavior. Whenever she walked by, the men cracked wise, shouting out things like, "Hey, Ethel—just so's you know, I'm a meatloaf man myself!" The women settled for cold silence and even colder stares.

It bothered Ethel, but it didn't stop her. Only one person's opinion mattered in the least bit. And when she dropped by Frank's mobile home with a new dish every day, he seemed . . . well, not exactly pleased, but not outright displeased, either. Certainly his gut was getting even bigger.

Yet he never got around to saying the words Ethel was waiting to hear: "Why don't you come on in and help me eat this?" He would just smile, thank her politely, and shut his door, leaving

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Ethel to walk back alone to her trailer, where she would leaf through her Betty Crocker cookbook in search of the magic recipe that would convince Frank's stomach to say open sesame to his heart.

Ethel had cooked almost everything in the Meat and Desserts sections when Connie Sandrelli came on the scene. She was a widow from Rhode Island. She was alone. She was pretty. And, much worse, she could cook. She started bringing chicken cacciatore and eggplant pasta torte and ravioli and other foreign-sounding fare to Always Sunny's weekly potluck dinner.

Ethel found these strange, gloppy-looking dishes somehow disquieting and unwholesome, but everyone else oohed and aahed and asked for more. Especially the men. Especially *the* man—Frank.

Connie should've done some research, asked around, respected seniority. As far as Ethel was concerned, there was a NO TRESPASSING sign hanging around Frank's neck.

But no. Connie had to go and jump Ethel's claim. Frank asked Connie for some of that homemade Italian cooking, and she obliged. Soon she was bringing him something new nearly every day: cioppino and baked ziti and all kinds of supposedly Italian food that Ethel had never seen in a Chef Boyardee can.

Ethel retaliated by upgrading to a more expensive cookbook. Frank, meanwhile, was growing even fatter, even faster.

Ethel and Connie's culinary brawl raged for weeks with no clear victor. Always Sunny's oddsmakers pegged the outcome as even money: Connie had youth and looks on her side; Ethel had raw determination.

The Christmas party changed everything. As always, it was the highlight of the trailer park's social calendar. Everyone gathered in the rec hall for caroling and eggnog and presents. And Santa Claus, of course.

It was obvious who should suit up as St. Nick this year. There was only one man in the park whose belly really did shake like jelly when he laughed.

So an hour into the party, Frank Schmidt ho-ho-hoed his way through the door in the park's ancient red suit and cottonball beard. And he wasn't alone. Santa Claus had a helper this year. Connie Sandrelli.

She was wearing a Santa hat and black boots and a red frock that didn't quite reach her knees. Ethel thought she looked like an elf hooker. She was helping Frank hand out all the dime-store gifts in his sack. She even brought one to a fuming Ethel.

Connie smiled as she handed Ethel the little brightly wrapped package, but all Ethel saw were fangs. She didn't bother to open the gift. She wrapped it in her paper napkin and left it sitting

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next to her plate like something unpleasant she'd picked out of her food.

And then, the presents distributed, Santa took his place on his "throne"—a metal folding chair at the front of the hall.

"Ho ho ho! Who wants to come and sit on Santa's knee?" He turned to Connie. "How about my little elf first?"

Connie hesitated, blushing.

"Come on!" Frank patted his lap. "Come here and tell old Santa what you want for Christmas!"

There were shouts from the audience—"Yeah!" and "Go, Connie!" and "Ignore that dirty old man!" Ethel barely fought back the urge to screech, "Don't you *dare,* you cheap Italian floozy!"

Connie grinned at the crowd for a moment before taking her place on Santa's lap. There were a few cheers.

"So what can Santa Claus pull out of his sack for you, little girl?" Frank boomed.

Connie whispered in his ear.

Frank waggled his eyebrows and gave out a hearty, "Ho ho hoooo!" And then he kissed her.

Some people laughed. Some people applauded. And one person walked out of the room, went to her trailer, and began plotting Connie Sandrelli's demise.

Ethel scoured her trailer for instruments of death. Soon she had assembled on her kitchen table a pistol (for shooting), a steak knife and knitting needles (for stabbing), a hammer and a scorched bust of former Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight (for bludgeoning), a pillow and a plastic Winn-Dixie bag (for smothering), a toaster (for dropping into a water-filled bathtub), and a fruitcake (for eating—Ethel was hungry).

The pistol wouldn't work because Ethel couldn't find any bullets: Ralph had hidden them somewhere, though he refused to explain why. He just said it was "a precaution." The steak knife, knitting needles, hammer, bust, pillow, and bag were out due to Ethel's arthritis. Some nights, she could barely get her dentures out. A life-or-death struggle with a woman five years her junior definitely seemed like a bad idea.

That left the toaster. Ethel sat at the table for fifteen minutes, chewing on her fruitcake, running various scenarios through her mind. But no matter how she imagined it, she couldn't quite see a toaster attack panning out. She would have to wait until Connie was taking a bath, break into her trailer, creep into the bathroom, and plug the toaster in without being noticed—and then hope that the electrical cord was long enough to reach the tub.

No, she needed something easier. Something less risky. More sneaky.

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She took another bite of fruitcake. Her false teeth clamped down hard on something brittle. It crunched. She cursed.

The cake had come from the grocery store, that was the problem. Those big chains put all kinds of crazy things in their fruitcakes—candy and cherries and whatnot. You never knew what you were going to bite into.

Ethel stopped chewing.

Her chief weapon in the war for Frank Schmidt had been food. Why change strategy now?

The next day, she baked a fruitcake.

Ethel Queenan's Christmas Surprise Fruitcake

1 cup diced candied orange peel
1 cup diced candied lemon peel
2 cups diced citron
3 cups raisins, chopped
1/2 cup two-year-old leftover red wine from back of fridge
1/2 cup amaretto (because brandy is too expensive and what's the difference, really?)
1/2 cup Peppermint Schnapps (because it's been sitting around forever so why not use it?)
3 cups flour
3 teaspoons cinnamon
6 teaspoons nutmeg
2 teaspoons cloves, ground
2 teaspoons allspice
1 cup rat poison
1/2 cup Ajax cleanser
6 teaspoons dead husband's heart pills, ground
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup butter
2 cups brown sugar
4 eggs
1/2 cup molasses
1 teaspoon spittle

Mix fruit in a large bowl; pour in wine and brandy substitute. Stir and set aside. Start sipping leftover Schnapps.

Sift flour with spices, rat poison, Ajax, and pills. Add baking powder and salt and sift again. Start second glass of Schnapps. Throw in more spices, just to be safe. Then more poison. Then more spices.

Cream butter, add sugar and eggs, mix thoroughly. Add molasses and stir. Spit in batter. Sprinkle with more rat poison. Start third glass of Schnapps.

Heat oven to 300 degrees. Feel queasy. Pour remaining Schnapps down drain. Lie on couch for twenty minutes.

When head stops swimming, get up and put cake batter in oven.

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Bake for three hours. Lie down on couch again. Vow never to touch another drop of Schnapps. Imagine painful, pleasing death of husband-snatching Jezebel strumpet.

It baked up quite nicely. Ethel thought it was the most beautiful fruitcake she'd ever seen. She was almost sorry she couldn't try a slice.

Her alarm clock beeped her awake at three the next morning. She rolled out of bed, put on her darkest outfit (a navy blue polyester pantsuit she'd purchased in 1979), and walked to Connie Sandrelli's trailer. She left the fruitcake on the doorstep. It was covered in wrapping paper with a red bow on top. Attached to the bow was a small note.

Merry Christmas, beautiful!
—Your Secret Admirer

Ethel walked away humming "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." When she got home, she climbed back in bed, expecting to be awakened in a few hours by the sound of sirens.

When Connie Sandrelli found the fruitcake next to her morning paper, she knew immediately who it was from.

Frank Schmidt.

A week before, Frank got it into his head that it would be cute if *he* started cooking for *her* for a change. The first dish he brought her was something called "Cheeseburger Italiana"—or, as Frank called it, "Cheeseburger Eye-talian." It was a casserole. He'd found the recipe on a box of Bisquick.

As a serious, marinara-in-her-veins Italian-American, Connie had to try very hard not to be offended. She had to try even harder when she tasted it.

Frank, it appeared, hadn't done much cooking in his life. He didn't seem to know the difference between garlic powder and cumin, for instance. And ketchup and tomato sauce were considered interchangeable. Somehow, Connie kept a smile on her face as she choked down the blasphemous culinary abomination.

When Frank came by a few days later with something he called "Velveeta Loaf," Connie let him know she wasn't hungry just then but she sure was looking forward to a heaping plate later on. Over the next week, she transferred one hearty slice at a time from the refrigerator to the bottom of the garbage can, thus creating the illusion that she was actually eating Frank's spongy orange-brown creation.

Given her earlier encounters with Frank's kitchen experiments, Connie was in no hurry to chomp into the man's first foray into cake baking. She had always found the pleasures of fruitcake to be

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fickle and fleeting under the best of circumstances. A Frank Schmidt fruitcake could be dangerous.

So Connie gave the cake a place of honor amongst the cookies and biscotti and chocolate balls sent down by her relatives up north, but she never took a bite. She only mentioned the fruitcake to Frank once, fearful that he would suggest brewing up some coffee and tucking in.

"Thanks for your little surprise," she told him. "It's lovely."

Frank smiled and gave her an "Aww shucks, it was nothing" shrug. He thought she was talking about the Velveeta Loaf. Or maybe something else he'd done. His memory wasn't what it used to be. And anyway, forty-three years of marriage had taught him not to question a woman's gratitude. If it's something you earned, great. If it's not something you earned . . . well, even better.

Over the next week, the mountain of holiday treats in Connie's kitchen was gradually worn away by the erosion of near-constant snacking. Yet the fruitcake remained, inviolate, untouchable, like some moist and mysterious monolith.

It had to go.

But Connie couldn't just throw it away. It was a symbol of Frank's devotion . . . though, in all likelihood, a spectacularly untasty one.

So instead of tossing it out, she dressed it up. She plated it with candy armor—gumdrops and Skittles along the sides, peppermints and candy canes on top. When she was done, the fruitcake was unrecognizable.

She covered it in Saran Wrap and walked it to the trailer of Always Sunny's most hated resident: George "Bones" Heaton, the manager. She felt a little guilty about pawning off someone else's gift as one of her own. But wasn't there an old legend that there's really only one fruitcake in the world—it just keeps getting passed around? So who was she to stand in the way of tradition?

Bones—short for "Skin and . . ."—was a small, grizzled man with a large, fleshy mouth that spewed ill will like a smokestack. Always Sunny's residents were not, on the whole, a rowdy or unreliable bunch. So Bones spent very little of his time breaking up wild parties or overseeing evictions. Instead, his duties as manager leaned heavily toward maintenance work and general handymanery.

As undemanding as these chores generally were, Bones seemed bound by holy oath to make them as unpleasant as possible for all concerned. His rote response to any complaint, large or small, was the words, "Whadaya want *me* to do about it?"

Even if you could tell him exactly what you expected him to do, the odds weren't necessarily good that Bones would actually do it. Your chances for success worsened considerably if you'd managed

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to get on his bad side somehow—which was easy to do, since his "bad side" comprised the majority of his being.

In December, there were two sure-fire ways to inspire his wrathful sloth: (A) Coming to his door singing Christmas carols or (B) *Not* coming to his door with a present. Bones had been known to chase away suddenly-not-so-merry carolers with a garden hose. Gifts, on the other hand, he accepted greedily, if not graciously.

Some of her new neighbors let Connie know that a Christmas offering to Bones was mandatory. Connie was, of course, outraged and offended. But she also had cracks in her driveway and a tree that was growing perilously close to her telephone line. So she brought Bones a gift.

"Huh," the man grunted when he saw it. "You say there's a cake under all that candy?"

Connie came as close as she could to a good-natured laugh. "Oh yes. It should be a good one, too. I had my niece Gina make it for me. She's a pastry chef up in New York. A real whiz-kid with the baking. Sometimes she gets kind of fancy with the ingredients . . . you know, experimental. But she—"

"Yeah, okay, thanks," Bones said, signaling that Connie's audience with him was at an end. The door to his trailer was closed before she could finish her farewell "Merry Christmas!"

Later that day, Bones's wife Virgie found the fruitcake on the kitchen table when she returned from the latest meeting of her divorce support group. She'd never been divorced before. She was just trying it on for size. After four weeks with the group, she still couldn't figure out what everybody was complaining about.

"What's this?" she called out.

Bones was in the living room, approximately twelve feet away, watching Judge Judy dole out justice reality-TV style. "What's what?"

"This thing in the kitchen with all the crap on it!"

"What?"

"This log on the counter!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"This weird-lookin' loaf thing in the kitchen!"

"That's a fruitcake!"

"A what?"

"A frrrruitcaaaake!"

A fruitcake? Virgie thought it looked more like a candy-encrusted brick. "Where'd it come from?"

It took almost five more minutes of yelling to work out the details. Virgie never left the kitchen, and Bones never left his seat.

When it was all over, Virgie took the fruitcake to its new home. She thought the cake looked more decorative than edible, so she placed it amongst the snow globes, nutcrackers, and miniature

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angels on the mantelpiece of the double-wide trailer's faux fireplace. There it stayed for the next twelve months.

Virgie and Bones usually packed up their Christmas decorations around Valentine's Day or, at the very latest, Easter. But this year it became a one-man job—and the man in question was notorious for his reluctance to commit to any project that required the TV remote control to leave his hand.

When Virgie left Bones, she chose the timing very carefully. She didn't want a big fuss. So she started packing her bags five seconds after the kickoff of the Super Bowl. She was out of the trailer by halftime. Bones tracked her down the next day to attempt a reconciliation—over the phone.

"Awww, you don't care if I'm there or not, George," Virgie told him. "I bet you didn't even stop watching the game after I left last night."

"Well, yeah," Bones admitted sheepishly. On the widescreen TV a few feet before him, Judge Judy was scolding a man for selling his best friend a sickly parrot. "But I didn't enjoy it."

The reconciliation did not take root, and Bones found himself single for the first time in fifteen years. It didn't really affect his life much, except that there was a lot less shouting around the trailer and no more bickering about what to watch on TV.

The following November, Bones's bachelorhood produced an unexpected dividend. Through no effort of his own, the man suddenly found himself with an admirer.

Ethel Queenan began dropping by every day with food.

"That wife of yours never fed you right," she would say as she handed him her latest casserole. "And now that she's been gone all these months, you're just wasting away to nothing."

In attempting to seduce Bones Heaton with Fiesta Chicken and Tuna Noodle Strudel, Ethel knew she'd scraped all the way through the bottom of the barrel deep into the dirt beneath. She was desperate.

Whether Connie Sandrelli didn't care for fruitcake or simply had a cast-iron stomach Ethel would never know. But the man-stealing hussy not only survived the holiday season, she married Frank Schmidt just a few months later. To show that there were no hard feelings, Ethel baked them a chocolate cake—or, to be more precise, a chocolate, Ajax, Clorox, Cascade, Tide, and lemon-fresh Pledge cake. The resulting black sludge was so noxious with chemicals Ethel had to throw it out, pan and all. She nearly passed out from the fumes.

Only two more Always Sunny men came on the market after that. One died three weeks after his wife's funeral. The other

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moved to San Francisco with his wife's brother, something he'd apparently been waiting nearly forty years to do.

That made Bones Heaton the only unattached male in the trailer park. He was a little too young and a lot too lazy, but he was eligible, and Ethel needed a husband. For her, being single was simply not an option. Take the "man" out of "woman" and all you've got's a "wo," her mother used to say. Ethel always assumed that this was a firm endorsement of marriage. She had no intention of being a "wo" the rest of her life.

Bones accepted her attentions with uncharacteristic patience, largely because he'd grown sick of frozen pizza and fish sticks. Like Frank Schmidt before him, he never invited Ethel inside or dropped by her trailer for a visit. But he never chased her away with the garden hose, either.

In fact, as Christmas drew closer, he began to worry that she'd give up on him before his refrigerator was fully stocked. Given the trailer park's demographics, it was only a matter of time before another Always Sunny widower stepped onto the auction block. And Bones was realistic enough about his personal charms to know what would happen if he faced competition.

What was called for was a Christmas gift. But Bones being Bones, it would have to entail minimum effort to procure. Ideally, it would be something he could find within ten steps of his La-Z-Boy.

Which is how it came to be that one warm December evening Bones Heaton presented to Ethel Queenan a beautifully decorated, twelve-month-old fruitcake. Ethel cooed and made a fuss over it, though it actually looked far too gussied up for her tastes. But the man had made an effort on her behalf, and that boded well.

And anyway, Ethel thought as she walked back to her trailer, peel off the peppermints and the thing was probably perfectly fine.

She'd been cooking all afternoon, and she was hungry. ●

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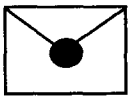

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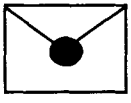

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IF AT FIRST . . .

by Robin Hathaway

In spring of 2003 Robin Hathaway, author of the award-winning Dr. Fenimore mysteries, will start a new series with St. Martin's Press. The first book, entitled *Scarecrow*, will introduce an unusual amateur sleuth—a female doctor on the staff of a local motel. *EQMM* has published two of the Philadelphia writer's previous stories. †

One day Arnold brought home an ugly piece of garden sculpture. He was so proud of it. It was a concrete gnome, about a foot high, with bulbous eyes, a bent nose, a droopy mouth, and two horns sprouting from its head. It had cloven hands and feet. The hands were pressed together under its chin, as if in prayer—or some form of supplication.

My husband was always bringing home ugly things. I was used to it. But the ugliest thing he ever brought home was his mother. Oh, she wasn't bad-looking. Your typical old lady—stooped, gray, wrinkled. It was her personality. A semi-invalid (she claimed), ensconced in the master bedroom, demanding that I wait on her day and night with that little brass bell. (She'd brought it with her.) Every time it rang I had to trudge up the stairs, stand in the doorway, and wait for her latest order, given in that whiny, raspy voice of hers. Then I'd set off to do her bidding.

It wouldn't have rankled so much if she hadn't tried to break up Arnold and me every chance she got since our wedding day. She was always pointing out my shortcomings. And once, when I was out of town visiting *my* mother, she actually went so far as to introduce him to the daughter of a friend of hers, who just happened to be a knockout!

She didn't bother Arnold. He was a salesman and out of town a lot. I took the brunt of it. Sometimes I would get so frustrated, I'd sit on the porch and talk to myself—or to that gnome of his. Arnold had stuck him right in the corner of the porch so, no matter where I sat, he stared at me with those bug-eyes. Sometimes when a breeze blew, the leaves cast shadows across his face, and it seemed as if his expression changed.

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One especially bad day, after *she* had me running up and down the stairs twenty times or more, I plopped down in the wicker rocker, exhausted, and stared at him. The cast of light or turn of shadow that evening gave the little dwarf an almost sympathetic expression.

"How can I get rid of her?" I heard myself say aloud.

Of course, he didn't answer but his blank concrete eyes seemed to focus on something in the chair next to me. A fat, flowered pillow.

Smother her!

Why not? No telltale marks. No sign of struggle. Just a peaceful death in her own bed. *(Our* bed.)

I waited impatiently for Arnold's next trip out of town. It finally came. As soon as I was sure the old woman was asleep, I tiptoed up the stairs and peeked in her room. She was lying on her back, her chest rising and falling at regular intervals. Every now and then she would let out a snore. The murder weapon lay conveniently at hand. Stealthily, I made my way across the room, grabbed the pillow, and plunked it over her sleeping face. As the old woman writhed and squirmed, I bore down harder. Abruptly, she stopped moving. My elation ended when I felt a sharp prick in my left buttock.

"Ouch!" I jumped up.

"Ha-ha-ha!" she cackled, throwing the pillow to one side and displaying a large, old-fashioned hatpin.

I rubbed my backside and thought, *I'll have to get a tetanus shot.* "How did you know?" I asked.

"I heard you babbling on the porch about how you'd like to get rid of me." Caught in a beam of moonlight, one eye shone wickedly as she continued, "And I was ready for you!"

"Are you going to tell the police?" I was trembling.

"Of course not."

"Or Arnold?"

"Not on your life." Again that fiendish chuckle. "I haven't had so much fun in years. Can't wait to see what you'll get up to next."

I started to leave the room and paused. "How did you hear me down on the porch?" I demanded. "I thought you were deaf."

"Some days I'm deaf; some days I'm not." She grinned slyly. "Now go away and let me sleep."

Three months went by before I dared try again. It was colder and the windows were shut. Even so, when I went out on the porch to consult the gnome, I kept my voice low. "What next?"

Shadows dappled his small stone face, and for an instant his mouth seemed to pucker.

Poison! I thought.

But what possible poison could I give the old witch that she wouldn't detect? I glanced at the gnome. His pop-eyes stared right past me at something beside the porch step. A plant, with lovely purple bell-shaped blossoms. Foxglove.

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That night I took special pains preparing her salad. Lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, bean sprouts—and on top, with the salt and pepper, I sprinkled a teaspoon of foxglove leaves—chopped extra fine. Added to her daily dose of digitalis, that should just do it.

When I went up to collect her dirty dishes, I was happy to see she had licked them clean. (She always had reminded me of an animal. A small, vicious animal.) I could hardly sleep that night for thinking of all the things I would buy with our inheritance. There was that lovely ruby brooch with the gold filigree setting in the jeweler's window. And that black cocktail dress I'd seen advertised in the paper. And that cute little sports car they were always showing on TV. I finally fell asleep, dreaming of all the beautiful things I would buy to make up for all the ugly things I had endured over the years from Arnold.

As I carried my mother-in-law's breakfast tray up the stairs, it was hard to control my eagerness. The old woman was lying quite still—her face turned to the wall. The poison had done its work. I set the tray on the bedside table and bent close to check her breathing.

"Boo!" She sprang up.

I fell back, almost fainting.

When she saw my expression, she broke into that cackle of hers. "I don't know which dish had the poison in it," she said, "but I flushed them all down the toilet, just like I do every night."

"You . . ."

"Ever since you tried to smother me, I haven't eaten a thing you gave me."

"But . . ."

"Why haven't I starved to death?" She nodded at the telephone beside the bed. "Takeout. Chinese one night, pizza the next. They come after you and Arnold are sound asleep. I've trained them well. They climb up the rose trellis onto the porch roof and slip it in the window. I'm a big tipper!"

Her cackle followed me down the stairs. All those carefully prepared meals, day after day, night after night. All wasted. All down the drain—literally. Tears of fury blinded me. *Just wait, you old witch. I'll get you yet.*

My little gnome friend was waiting for me. Today, his eye rested on a sparrow who was frolicking in the birdbath. The little bird was flailing its wings and flipping its tail, spraying drops of water everywhere.

I watched for a while, entranced by the sun making rainbows in the water drops. I don't know when the idea came to me. *Drowning.* What a delightful way to go. A string of bubbles—and presto! When the bell rang, its insistent ring letting me know it was time for her bath, I smiled and flexed my fingers.

I went through the usual routine of helping the old woman out of

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her nightgown and into the bathtub, testing the water first to make sure it was exactly the right temperature—not too hot, not too cold. Once settled in the tub, she grabbed the washcloth and cake of soap from my hands and began to wash. As she soaped her wrinkled body, she sang the little tuneless ditty she always sang when she bathed.

Sensing that I was hovering, she interrupted herself and said in her harsh, nasal voice, "You may go now! I'll call you when I need you." She continued singing (if that's what you'd call it).

I walked to the door and closed it firmly. But I stayed on the bathroom side. I slipped out of my sandals, softly padded back to the bathtub, and stood behind her. I watched her soaping her wrinkled body and listened to her singing her tuneless tune. Then I pounced, pushing her head down, down, down, deep under the water. I held it there until the string of bubbles stopped.

"Pop!" Out sprang the plug.

The old woman had wrapped her clawlike toes around the chain that was attached to the plug and yanked it out.

Gurgle, gurgle, glug, the water rushed down the drain.

She grinned up at me. "Pretty hard to explain an old woman drowning in an empty tub!"

Her laugh chased me down the stairs and out onto the porch. I looked at the gnome. Was he smiling? I went over and kicked him.

A year went by. My conversations with the gnome had become desultory without murder plans to brighten them. But I had given up on the old crone. She had beaten me. It was my lot to slavishly climb the stairs twenty times a day and wait on her. I wasn't going to try again.

One especially hot day—too hot to talk, even in a whisper—I sat rocking slowly, staring at the gnome. His body had acquired some moss and a few rust stains from being exposed to all kinds of weather. His face was blank. There wasn't the slightest breeze to flutter a single leaf to cast the faintest shadow on his stony face and give it expression.

The bell rang.

I roused myself and, like a robot, stood up. But instead of moving to the door, I moved, trancelike, toward the dwarf. I bent and lifted him. He was heavier than I had expected. About fifteen pounds. And solid. Solid concrete. I carried him, like a baby, cradled in my arms, up the stairs to my mother-in-law's room.

Through a mist of pain, I heard the ambulance sirens stop out front, the doorbell ring, and her shrill voice greeting the paramedics: "Go right upstairs. A terrible accident. She's completely crippled. Tripped over my bedroom slippers and dropped this cement *thing* on her foot. Can't imagine why she brought it up to my room. Wanted to show it to me, I suppose . . ." ●

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Rumpole and the New Year's Resolutions

by John Mortimer

"Offer her your seat, Rumpole." These were the instructions of my wife Hilda, known to me only as She Who Must Be Obeyed. "Have you forgotten your New Year's Resolution?"

"It's only New Year's Eve," I complained. We were on a crowded tube train on our way to dinner south of the river with Archie Prosser, a new member of our chambers and a great catch for Hilda as his father was Lord Nowhere Very Important. "The resolutions don't come into force until tomorrow," I told her. I was rather fond of my seat. Seats were in short supply and I had laid claim to mine as soon as we got on at Gloucester Road.

"You'd better start now and get into practice. Go over and offer that woman your seat."

The woman in question seemed to be surrounded by as many children as the one who lived in a shoe. There were children, perhaps a dozen or more, scattered about the carriage, laughing, shouting, quarrelling, reluctantly sharing sweets, bombarding her for more, as she hung to a strap. The children were of assorted sexes and colours, mainly, I thought, in the eleven- to thirteen-year-old bracket. And I thought she might have been a schoolteacher taking them to some improving play or concert. But as I approached her I got a whiff of a perfume that seemed, even to my untutored nose, an expensive luxury for a schoolteacher. Other noticeable things about her were a white lock, a straight line like

The famous moniker "She Who Must Be Obeyed," which Rumpole uses surreptitiously in reference to his wife in this and other stories, has a source. "The phrase is from H. Rider Haggard's adventure novel *She*. The title character, Ayesha, Queen of Kor, is known to her subjects as SWMBO," says the Rumpole homepage. Mr. Mortimer's latest book is *Rumpole Rests His Case* (Viking 11/02). ¶

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a dove's feather, across black hair. She also, and I thought this unusual, was wearing gloves of a colour to go with her suit.

"Excuse me." The train had picked up speed and gave a sudden lurch which, although I had my feet planted firmly apart, almost toppled me. I put out a hand and grabbed an arm clothed in soft velvet. The woman was engaged in urgent conversation with a small boy, who while asking her whether they were getting out at the next station seemed to be offering her something, perhaps some sort of present, which she took without any show of reluctance.

Then she turned to me with an expression of amused concern. "I say," she said, "are you all right?"

"I'm not doing badly," I reassured her. "But I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Yes. Of course. But shouldn't you sit down?"

"No, no." I felt the situation sliding out of control. "Shouldn't *you* sit down?" The smile was about to turn into laughter. "But I've come to offer you my seat."

"Please don't! Why don't you go back and sit on it? Your need is obviously far greater than mine. Anyway, we're all getting out at the Oval."

It was an embarrassing moment. I knew how Saint George might have felt if, when about to release the beautiful princess, she told him to go home and she was far happier tied up to a tree with the dragon.

"Your first gentlemanly act, Rumpole." Hilda was unforgiving. "And you couldn't pull it off."

New Year's Day dawned bright and frosty over the Gloucester Road. Remembering Hilda's icy disapproval when I turn up late for breakfast, I pulled on the warm dressing gown, ran a comb through what was left of my hair, blew my nose, and presented myself in the kitchen full of apologies.

"Must've overslept," I told Hilda. "Don't know how it could've happened."

To my amazement, what I was looking at was a sympathetic smile on the face of She Who Must Be Obeyed. Instead of the sharp wind of a rebuke from my life partner, she was purring, like a cat who has just been handed a saucer full of cream.

"It's good for you to sleep, Rumpole. You need the rest. You work so hard . . . I'm amazed at how you keep going."

Not half as amazed as I am by this extraordinary change of character, was what I didn't say.

"Now what would you like for breakfast?"

"Just a cup of coffee. If you've got one made . . ."

I should point out that Hilda, apparently anxious about the Rumpole girth (a fact of nature that has never troubled me in the

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least), had insisted that I take nothing but a plate of muesli (I dislike the taste of dried cardboard) and carrot juice for breakfast—a meal which caused me to rush off to the greasy spoon Tastee Bite in Fleet Street for an emergency cholesterol replacement. Now she made a surprising offer.

"What can I cook you? Bacon? A couple of sausages? Two eggs sunnyside up on a fried slice? We might have some potatoes . . ."

"Hilda." By now I was getting anxious. "Are you feeling quite well?"

"Not altogether well, Rumpole. Hurt. Deeply hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"I just had a letter from Dodo Macintosh." The hand with which she lifted the sheet of notepaper from the table was, I thought, trembling. Dodo was one of She's oldest friends, both having survived the tough experience of Saint Elfreda's Boarding School for girls. "You don't think I'm bossy, do you, Rumpole?"

For once in my long life at the bar, I was stuck for a reply. I could only mutter, "Bossy? Of course not! Perish the thought."

"Dodo tells me I am."

"Why ever—" I gave, I thought, a convincing imitation of a man who has just been told that the world is, contrary to all previously held beliefs, flat—"should your old friend Dodo Macintosh say such a thing?"

"I really don't know." Hilda sighed. "I merely wrote and told her I thought her new living room curtains were a horrible mistake, and that she should really find a more interesting subject for the watercolours than Lamorna Cove in the rain. Oh, and I probably reminded her that to go shopping in a T-shirt and jeans, topped with a baseball hat, at her age was simply to invite ridicule."

"Might you," I hazarded a guess, "have added something about mutton dressed as lamb?"

"Oh, Rumpole." She looked at me in what I took to be an appealing fashion and I became judicial. "I don't suppose she liked that? I have made a New Year's Resolution." At this point Hilda stood and spoke as though she were swearing an oath of allegiance to some great cause. "I shall never be bossy again."

She then cooked my fry-up and a great change seemed to have come over the world.

The events of that notable New Year didn't only concern the resolutions of the Rumpole family. The spring buds were shooting when I and my faithful instructing solicitor Mr. Bernard sat in the interview room in Brixton prison with Trevor Timson, the young hopeful of that clan of South London villains whose devotion to ordinary decent crime has kept the Rumpoles in bread and butter, not to mention an occasional bottle of Chateau Thames Embankment, over the years. Trevor had been arrested in the following

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apparently deeply incriminating circumstances.

It was around six o'clock one evening, the South London tube station was crowded with returning office workers. There had been an outbreak, a rash of pinched wallets, dipped-into handbags, and emptied hip pockets, so the railway police were inconspicuously alert. Two of them were present in the lift when Mr. Hornby, a grey-haired company director who prided himself on his use of public transport, felt a fluttering disturbance in his breast pocket and found his wallet flown away. Being an old-fashioned sort of company director, he called out, "Stop thief!" and the railway detective sergeant in the lift detained the passengers. Trevor Timson was unhesitantly denounced by a witness who said she saw him take the wallet, which was found intact in his half-open shoulder bag. It contained three hundred pounds in crisp twenties.

"It's no good, Trevor. Not even Mr. Rumpole could argue out of this one. They've got a cast-iron witness." Bonny Bernard, usually cheerfully optimistic, had repeatedly told me that young Trevor's case was hopeless and felt there had been no point in our going to see him, let alone wasting my breath on a hopeless speech for the defence. To me, however, the phrase "cast-iron witness" represented a challenge.

"This wonderful witness who says she saw you take the money. Can you describe her?"

"She was a nice-looking lady." I thought Trevor was remarkably generous to a witness who was about to sink him.

"What sort of age?"

"I would say about as old as my mum. But better dressed."

"How old's your mum?"

"Forty-something. I should know. I forgot her last birthday and got told off about it."

"Alone, was she? Or someone with her?"

"Lots of kids."

"What?"

"She had a party of kids with her. They were all excited and chattering. Like she was taking them out for a school treat."

I felt a small tingling of excitement. Surely God, Fate, whoever or whatever is in charge of our chaotic, hit-or-miss existence, couldn't have been so kind to me? I decided to take a bet on an outside chance. "Did you notice anything particular about her? Her clothes? Or her hair, for instance . . . ?"

"Her hair? Odd you should mention that."

"How odd? What colour was it?"

"Black mostly. Quite dark, anyway. But there was a sort of white line. Like a line on a tennis court."

"A white lock?" By now the tingling had taken over completely. I stubbed out my small cigar in the ashtray provided by the prison authorities and stood up, as though for battle.

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"So it's got to be a plea, Trevor." Bernard was prepared to throw in the towel as cheerfully as possible, but I ventured to disagree. "No, it's not. Never plead guilty. Let that be your New Year's Resolution, Bonny Bernard. We're going to fight it—and who knows? We might even win."

Later, as we walked away across the prison yard, Bonny Bernard asked me how on earth I thought we might be able to spring Trevor Timson. I had one word for him. "Fingerprints."

"What sort of entertainment did you take these children to?" I asked the prosecution witness.

"They enjoyed the Science Museum. And the London Eye, of course. I'd take parties to the cinema. If the film was suitable."

"And what sort of films did you consider suitable? Thrillers? Crime stories?"

"I wouldn't take them to see films about crime." The witness, who had turned down my offer of a seat, was Fay Endersley, an elegant widow, solemnly and suitably dressed for the trial, the white lock of her jet hair making her out as someone of special importance. She had charmed the normally savage Judge Bullingham, who purred at her like a pussycat as she described her good works among the poorest abandoned inner-city children when she visited council homes and took out deprived children for treats, travelling, invariably, by tube.

"I'm sure you took them to excellent films." The old Bull was clearly besotted with her. "*The Sound of Music.* I remember that was a particularly charming one."

"Of course." Mrs. Endersley rewarded the judge with a coy little smile. "There aren't too many films like that about nowadays."

"Pity you didn't take them to something more exciting. Children like a bit of crime, don't they?" I suggested, much to the judge's irritation.

"Mr. Rumpole!" the old Bull exploded. "It may be your time is spent dealing with the more sordid side of life, but this good lady" (another beaming smile at the witness) "was trying to show the children a better world."

"Oh, I don't think you should knock crime, my Lord. After all, we both make our living out of it."

There was a little stir of laughter from the jury, which caused the Bull to lower his head and charge.

"That was an outrageous remark, Mr. Rumpole!"

"I'm sorry. I was under the impression we were both being paid to take part in a criminal trial. With your Lordship's permission, I'd like to continue my cross-examination." And without further apology I turned to the witness. "Mrs. Endersley, did you take different children out on each occasion, or was it the same group?"

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"It changed, of course. But there were some of the children I'd got to know really well."

"I'm sure there were. And, on the whole, did you find them easy to control? I mean, they did what you told them?"

"I'm sure they found it very easy to obey *you,* madam." The judge looked as though he'd be delighted to do exactly what Mrs. Endersley told him.

"If we could come to the facts of this case." I was determined to put an end to this cross-court flirtation. "When you say you saw my client take the wallet, were you wearing gloves?"

"Mr. Rumpole! What on earth's the relevance of that question?" the Bull charged in again.

"If your Lordship would allow the witness to answer, you might discover."

"Yes, of course I wore gloves." Mrs. Endersley looked down on us from the height of the witness box and seemed determined to put an end to our bickering. "I always wear gloves on the tube. It's so terribly dirty."

"Of course it is. There you are, Mr. Rumpole. You've got your answer!" The Bull was triumphant.

"Not quite yet, my Lord. Trevor Timson, the young man in the dock. I take it he wasn't wearing gloves on the tube."

"I hardly think so. I expect the only sort of gloves your client wears are boxing gloves, Mr. Rumpole." Members of the jury laughed obediently at the judge's apology for a joke. I could afford to be patient. After a great deal of delay the prosecution had treated the wallet for fingerprints and I was holding the forensic-science report.

"Would it interest you to know that there are none of Trevor Timson's fingerprints on the wallet," I told Mrs. Endersley. "And yet you say you saw him take it from Mr. Hornby's jacket?"

"It was very quick. A matter of seconds."

"I'm sure it was. And it must have been done by magic. He must have spirited the thing through the air without touching it."

Now the jury had stopped laughing and were looking at the witness with renewed interest.

"I don't know how he got it out." The witness did her best to look bored with my questions.

"On the other hand," I told her. "You were wearing gloves. So if you touched the wallet you would leave no prints."

"Mr. Rumpole!" The old Bull was clearly deeply shocked. "Are you suggesting that this lady, of unblemished character, who devotes her spare time to taking deprived inner-city children to such places as . . . the Science Museum . . . actually stole this man's wallet! On the underground!"

"She didn't steal it, my Lord. One of the children she carefully trained, and no doubt rather inadequately paid, stole it. She

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received it, though. And when she saw the railway police were going to make a search, she got rid of it, in the nearest open bag she saw near her, which happened to be Trevor Timson's. And then she denounced him as a thief." I thought I'd said quite enough to the judge and turned to that selfless philanthropist, the Mrs. Fagin of the Underground. "Is that the truth?"

"That is absolute nonsense."

She was looking only a little less composed and her hand grabbed the rail of the witness box as though she had a sudden fear of falling.

"Let's examine it, shall we. And see whether it's nonsense or not. You took these children out to museums and occasional cinemas. Perhaps gave them tea. Who paid?"

"I've told you. I paid."

"So they had no occasion to give you money."

"None at all."

"You're saying they didn't have money with them."

"None at all."

"So if anyone was to say they'd seen a boy hand you what looked like a couple of tenners that would be untrue?"

"That would be quite untrue. Yes."

"That would be quite untrue." The Bull was making a careful note of the answer and I had a bad moment, thinking I would have to go into the witness box and tell the jury what I had seen when, in a single quixotic moment, I had offered Mrs. Fagin Endersley my seat. A small, gap-toothed, grinning boy had handed her a couple of notes which she grasped quickly in a gloved hand.

It never came to that. Halfway through that morning Archie Prosser, for the prosecution, asked for an adjournment and Trevor was given bail. A couple of children had been caught in an attempted handbag pinching on the Circle Line. They had told the whole story of Mrs. Endersley's tireless work for inner-city youth, and a surprise visit to her flat in Primrose Hill has revealed a large quantity of handbags, wallets, watches, and folding money. The trial of the confident woman, who kept her white lock because she was so sure she'd never be identified, is fixed for next month. I doubt very much whether she'll want me to defend her.

"I really don't know whether it's worth making New Year's Resolutions," I told Hilda at breakfast. "You know why Trevor Timson was on the Underground when he got arrested?"

"No. Why?"

"He'd made a New Year's Resolution to visit his probation officer, a duty he occasionally skipped. On the other hand . . ."

"What's the other hand?"

"If you hadn't kept me up to a New Year's Resolution to offer my

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seat to ladies on trains, I'd've never seen those stolen tenners popped into Mrs. Endersley's welcoming gloves."

"And what about *my* New Year's Resolution?" Hilda looked doubtful. "Now I come to think about it, I'm not sure it was necessary. Dodo Macintosh sometimes talks an awful lot of nonsense."

"I quite agree."

"I'm not really bossy, am I?"

"Perish the thought."

"Good. I'm glad you said that. And by the way, you've got to stop eating all that fried food for breakfast. You're putting on far too much weight."

So we were in another year when a fry-up breakfast, once again, would be taken at the Tastee Bite in Fleet Street. All new resolutions would fade into the past, and normal life, for better or for worse, would be resumed. ●

The Ballad of Sweet Lucy

by Harry R. Hopkinson

Sweet Lucy sang in the Malibu Saloon.
Sometimes she served up the grog.
'Though she sang like a bird, on December 23rd
Someone shot Lucy down like a dog.

I saw Lucy land, little Effie by the hand,
On the nine-thirty plane from L.A.
She went down the street; got a room from Mrs. Peet
With the last fifty bucks of her pay.

It was early in June when she came to the saloon
And I gave her the job the same day,
Wondrin' what could give rise to the trouble in her eyes,
But her smile took my heart clean away.

It was holiday time just the day before the crime;
She came in with fear on her face.
"I'm afraid I must go, for I love my Effie so,
And we're no longer safe in this place."

He drove a long purple car, smoked a fifty-cent cigar;
Blew a fifty-dollar hole in my wall.
Now I'm filled with regret, for she could be living yet,
If I'd sent her away in the fall.

All the tourists now come to see where the deed was done;
Ask where Lucy had stood at the bar.
He took Effie away, and until this very day
There's no trace of the long purple car.

Sweet Lucy sang in the Malibu Saloon.
Sometimes she served up the grog.
'Though she sang like a bird, on December 23rd
Someone shot Lucy down like a dog.

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BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

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The Hunchback and the Stammerer
BY EDWARD MARSTON

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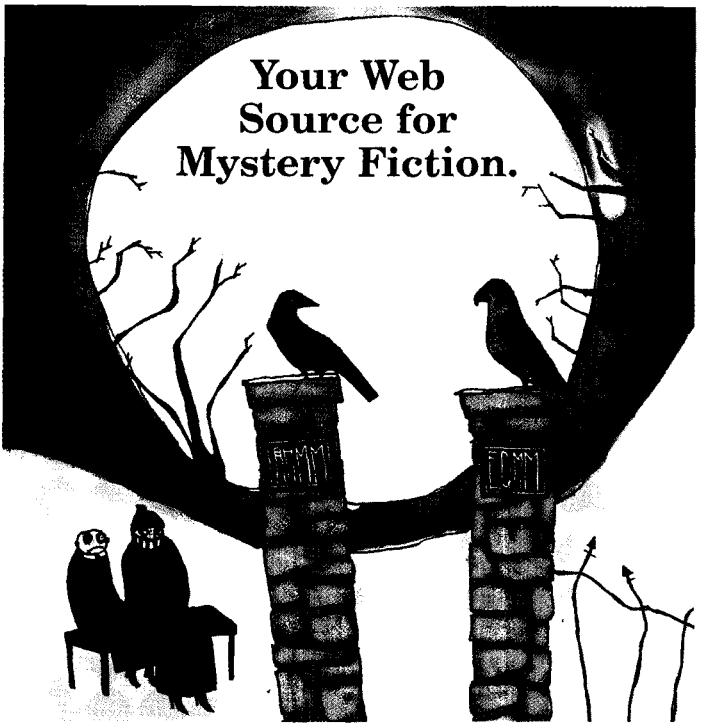

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